

"A craftsman of rare ability."
—DAVID BRIN, AUTHOR OF *EARTH* AND *THE POSTMAN*

SHADOWS UPON TIME

A man with long brown hair and a determined expression is running towards the viewer. He is wearing a black, high-collared coat with a red sash and a black cape that is billowing out behind him. He holds a glowing blue sword in his right hand and a small, glowing object in his left. The background is a bright, fiery orange and yellow, with streaks of light radiating from behind him, creating a sense of speed and power.

THE SUN EATER:
BOOK SEVEN

CHRISTOPHER
RUOCCHIO

By Christopher Ruocchio

The Sun Eater

EMPIRE OF SILENCE
HOWLING DARK
DEMON IN WHITE
KINGDOMS OF DEATH
ASHES OF MAN
DISQUIET GODS
SHADOWS UPON TIME

OceanofPDF.com

Christopher Ruocchio

SHADOWS UPON TIME



THE SUN EATER: BOOK SEVEN


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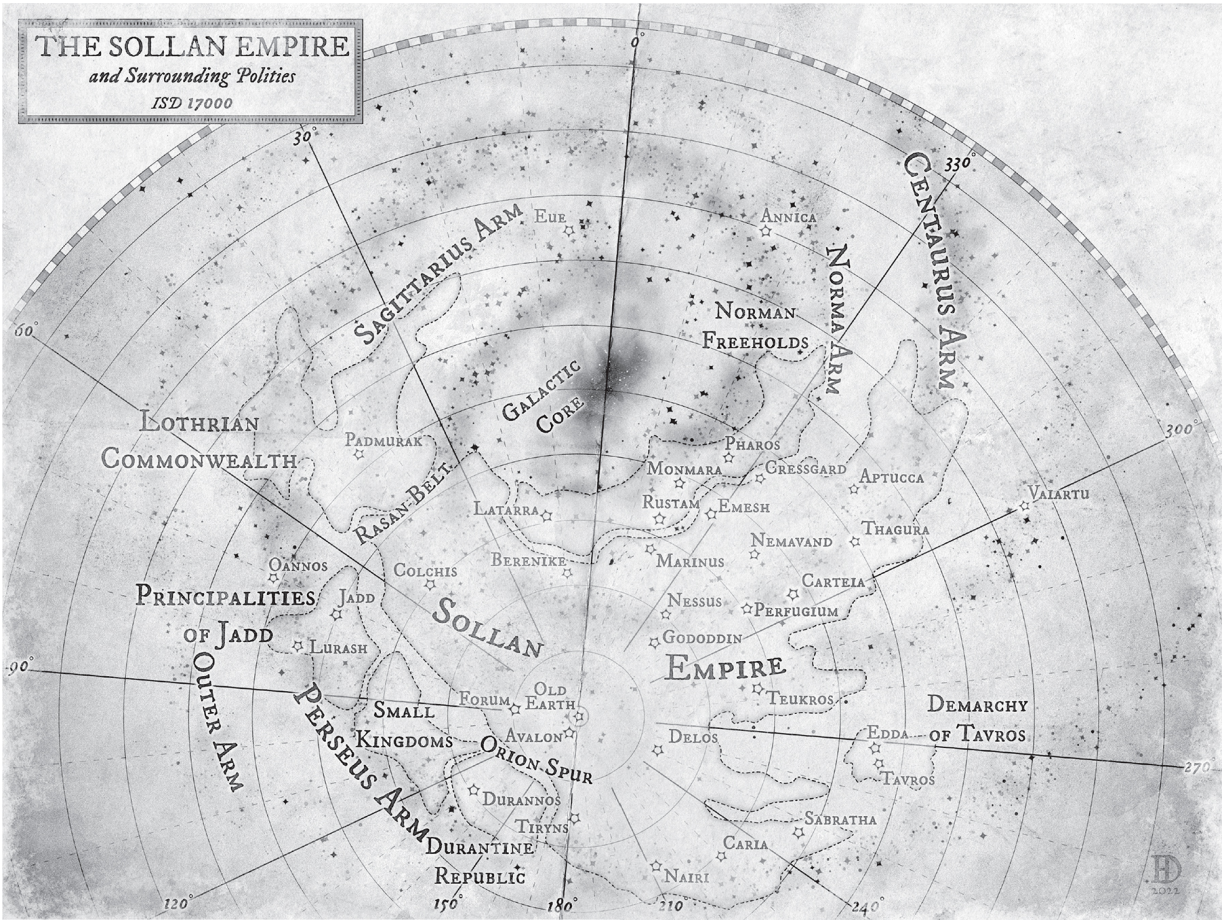
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DEAR READER.
ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE OF YOU
WHO'VE BEEN HERE SINCE 2018.
WE MADE IT.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HIGHEST PLACE

LIGHT.

There was no light in that dark place, save that which rolled like fog down the sloping tunnel to the domed cavern. No light, unless it was the false light of the lamp drone, the enslaved glowsphere I had set to circling that chamber like a star. It had been Valka's, that lamp, had accompanied her on I knew not how many expeditions, followed her into the countless darkened halls and tombs built by that powerful but unrecorded race, the unravelling of whose mystery had been her life's work.

It was fitting, then, that it should accompany me in that high hall.

That it should accompany *us*.

"Listen," I said, for what seemed the thousandth time.

"I am listening," said the woman seated cross-legged on the stone before me.

"*Kwatz!*" It was Gibson's reproach—the one the scholiasts had taken from the ancient Zen Buddhists. "You are speaking just now, Anaryan. Speaking is not listening."

Mollified, my daughter bowed her head, face concealed by the blank mask of her armored suit. I studied her in silence then a long moment. My eyes lingered on the sleeve of her swordmaster's *mandyas*, the red and gold samite hanging limp from the left shoulder. Realizing I was staring, I turned, resumed my orbit of the chamber, moving against the circuit of the lamp.

For a moment, the only sound in that airless place was that of my own breathing, my suit's rebreather whining faintly in the vents beneath my jaw. "We were not made to live as beasts," I said, "not made to live as we are. We were made with a higher purpose. For a better world."

Cassandra was silent. Valka's drone passed me by, circling in the other direction, illuminating the glassy black walls until my own reflection peered out at me.

Light.

The light moved off, plunging me into shadow once again.

Darkness.

"Can you hear it?" I asked. I had brought her to that place, hoping that *in* that place she might hear it more plainly—she who had never heard it before, would never hear it at all.

"Hear what?" she asked.

"Quiet," I said to her. A command, and the answer. "Listen."

Silence.

"There is nothing, Abba."

"We were made to hear, *Anaryan*," I said. "Every man was meant to *see* as I see, to *hear* as I hear. What I have been given, you must ask for yourself."

The dark about me was like the black of space between days.

Night.

"Can't you just . . . tell me how?"

"There is no *how*," I said. "I can do nothing that he does not first permit. He made me what I am, remade what I was. You must ask for the same."

"But how do I ask?"

"The same way you learned to ask *that* question," said I, still circling. "By *listening*."

The light came nearer, circling round to pass me again, and its coming was like the rising sun in that dim and many-shadowed hall.

Day.

"The magi who named him *Quiet*—little knowing what he was—named him truly. But he can be heard." I waited, expecting the girl to interrupt. When she did not, I exhaled, nodding my approval. "When you were a child, you learned your words listening to mine. You must listen to *his word* now. Only once you have listened will you be able to speak."

"You didn't learn to listen," Cassandra said. "He just . . . appeared to

you.”

“He revealed himself to me,” I said, “so that I might show others the way. Now listen, *Anaryan*. Can you hear it?”

She was silent this time, having at last—at least for the moment—learned that much.

I could hear it, even if she could not.

Song.

I discerned it for the first time after the battle above Vorgossos, after I deployed the Archontic weapons against the Imperial fleet and fled—in the silence of the long dark between the stars—though I realized I had been hearing it since I awoke upon the *Mistwalker* after my death at the hands of the Cantor, Samek.

A high, tremulous music.

It strained at the edges of my hearing.

The very voice of God.

“I can’t hear anything,” Cassandra said. “Aren’t you supposed to be teaching me?”

I had stopped walking then, and Valka’s lamp circled between us. “I *am* teaching you.”

“I can’t do it,” Cassandra said. “We’ve tried this a hundred times, Abba. It’s impossible!”

“It’s not impossible,” I said.

“Your *gift*—whatever it is—I didn’t inherit it.”

“Of course you didn’t,” I said. “You can’t inherit it. Don’t you understand? MINOS, Kharn Sagara, the Empire, the Chantry, the Jaddians . . . they’ve all tried to understand what I am. Every one of them has failed. What I’ve been given is not in my blood.”

Cassandra only looked at me.

“We are more than flesh and blood. It is the heart that must change, the spirit, the mind.” As I spoke, my own mind raced to the scholiasts, who sought to dampen emotion to make themselves more like the machines they were meant to replace. What we were attempting was little different. “The

universe roars at us, deafening the spirit so that we might not hear his voice. That's why we're here."

I had wanted to come down to the planet—that day of all days—one last time. I might never have another chance, and I longed to once more speak to the will and being that had twice saved me from death.

Though I could hear his music, he had not turned his face to me, nor uttered any word, not even there, upon the mountain.

"Abba," Cassandra said. "It is impossible."

"*Kwatz!*" I exclaimed, saw her startlement. "You have only just begun."

"But there is nothing!" she said. "I don't know what you can hear, but I can't. I'm not like you, I'm not . . ." She gestured up at me with her one remaining hand.

". . . changed?" I finished for her.

"Different!" She shook her head. "You were dead, Abba—I mourned you. Selene said she saw you die, said you were nothing but a puddle on the floor! But you're here, and—"

"You still doubt that I am myself?"

"No!" Cassandra turned her masked face from me. "No, but . . . you *are* different. *Changed* is one word, I suppose . . ." She devolved into her native Jaddian, cursing under her breath. "But you said yourself, you couldn't hear this . . . whatever I'm listening for . . . until *after* you came back. And you're not the same, you're . . ."

I smiled mildly. "Young again?"

"Well, yes," said she. "Maybe I need to be like you before I can do it."

"No," I said. "My . . . experience . . . has only made the hearing easier. What you see"—I gestured at my body, the new body the Absolute had given me—"is the fruit, not the germ."

Cassandra was silent then a long moment. "Then . . . do you think I can be . . . changed, too? Like you?"

It was my turn to hesitate. I felt the answer in me, tidied away in some undusted chamber in my mind. I had not put it there, but there were then—and are—so many things in me granted by revelation. "Yes," I said, and grew silent. "Everything must change, girl. And will. But the change must

not come from the blood, or by the praxis of the magi. They change the body to transform the spirit. We change the spirit.”

“And so change the body?” Cassandra asked.

The lamp passed between us, illuminating the anaglyphs carved on the walls, those letters that were not merely letters.

“As you see,” I said, and I shut my eyes.

The celestial music was still there, like the hum of distant engines, half unheard. Quiet indeed, it suffused the universe, sustained it, gave it *meaning*.

“There’s a story, an old story . . .” I began. “Sometimes it is about the God Emperor. Other times it is the Old Queen, Victoria. Else it is Arthur, or the Great Alexander . . . say it is Alexander. Desiring the knowledge of all things, he arrived at the gates of Eden, and, finding them barred by angels with wings like the lightning, he knocked on the gates, demanding as lord of the world that he be permitted to enter paradise. But the angels refused him. Three times they refused him, and when they had refused a third time, he demanded that instead he be given a gift from within. And so the doors opened a sliver, and a hand appeared and offered him the very thing he sought: a fig from the Tree of Knowledge. Sensing that here was a test, the great king did not eat of it, but at the direction of Orodes the sorcerer, he instead cut the fruit in two, setting aside one half. The remaining half he cut in two, setting aside one of the new-made quarters. And so on he went, cutting and cutting with that sword—the very sword with which he cut the knot at Gordium—until at last he held one single atom. At the sorcerer’s behest, this he split as well, down to a proton. Splitting the proton to its quarks, he brought down his blade a final time, and cleaved the quark in two, and at its splitting he felt the rush of strong winds, and heard a cry—as it were the word of some foreign tongue.” I paused then. “Do you know what he found inside that quark?”

Cassandra shook her head.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When the ancients peered into our cells and found the helix, they

discovered that each of us is a *word*, one writ in a language only our magi understand. There it was: the language of the human animal laid bare. Four letters. They thought this the answer to the mystery of life, little seeing how it raised further questions. When Alexander at last split the smallest particle, he found it empty. Believing he had his answer, he went away laughing. But the particle was not empty . . .”

“The word.” Cassandra saw where I was driving.

“Yes,” I said. “The magi think mathematics are the language of reality, but mathematics are only our attempt to translate the true language—this language . . .” I gestured at the anaglyphs inscribed on the walls “. . . into a language we can understand. But we *can* understand it already, we have the means—we have only forgotten.”

“That’s what you can hear?” How clearly I could see her face! Sense her incredulity! Even through the mask.

“The music,” I said, “the whole universe is singing. Now listen!”

I did not dare move, did not dare disturb her. Only the steady procession of the lantern disturbed that airless place. A call light flickered on the terminal I wore on my left wrist. Seeing it, my heart sank.

The time had come, as I knew it must. The time to leave that place and face the universe.

Fearing the blue light might shake Cassandra from her attempt, I banished the call with a gesture.

Looking down at her, I studied my daughter with the fullness of my vision, seeing her not as the three-dimensional object another man might see, but the manifold *event* she was. No mere body in space, but a wave crashing across the universe, rippling where she struck the present moment again and again, collapsing into one certain past from the infinite, uncertain futures.

In no thread of potential that I could see did she succeed. I could not force her, not with all my ascended strength. No man may carry another over the threshold. Each must take the first step and the final one himself.

I could only show her the gate.

My terminal flashed again, indicator chiming in the patch behind my

right ear. Covering the light, knowing she could not hear me on the private band, I said, “Marlowe.”

“Lord Marlowe.” The man who spoke was Holden, one of Captain Ghoshal’s men, and the first of those who had accompanied us on our little pilgrimage to the planet’s surface. “We’ve just had word from Special Agent Albé. The Jaddians have arrived.”

I shut my eyes against the fateful words.

Orphan had guessed the Jaddians’ arrival to within three hours of the fact. “Very good, Centurion,” I said. “We will not be much longer.”

With that, Holden withdrew. I could almost see him turn to relay my words to his companions in the shuttle outside.

“Did something happen?” Cassandra’s voice flickered in my ear.

I froze. She had seen the indicator, knew I had received a comm. The small light had stood out the brighter in that dark place. I shook my head. Everything about the human universe . . . our technology, our obligations, our very bodies, sought to obscure the Quiet’s word from us.

“The Jaddians have arrived.”

“Non posho pharo, Abba,” she said.

I can’t do it.

Willing her to feel the smile in my words, I said, “You will, Anaryan.”

She never did.

“Should we go?” she asked, uncrossing her legs to half rise from the black stone floor.

“We must,” I said, looking round at the domed hall. “I had hoped coming here would make this easier . . .”

Cassandra had found her feet by then. “It’s all right.” She joined me in my observation of the dome. “I just can’t do it.”

I did not argue with her, even to reassure her. I would not myself have wanted reassurance in that moment. I knew how she must feel. Defective. Insufficient. Had I not felt that way myself, many times? I only placed an arm on her shoulder. “I have never been a good teacher,” I said, remembering another Alexander.

“Maybe it can’t be taught,” she said.

I shook my head. "I know it can be."

"I'm sorry, Abba."

"We never thought it would be easy." I let my hand fall and, sketching a circle in the air, summoned Valka's lamp. The little false star scudded through the air to take up its place at my left shoulder, and together we turned and made our way up the sloping tunnel.

So deep underground, the lamp overpowered the planet's weak daylight. It would be a match for the sun even on the surface. But that dim star would burn a trillion years yet, cold and sedate as it was. Valka's lantern could not so long endure. The cost of its burning brighter was a shorter life.

What did that—does that say—about me, I wonder?

"Prince Kaim has come himself?"

"We can only hope," I said. The truth was, I could not be certain what we would find when we reached the rendezvous point. Would it be my friend, the Prince of Jadd? Alone as I had begged him?

"Lord Douro didn't give you any other choice."

"He did not," I said in agreement, thinking of that ill-starred lord of the Imperium, the Baron of Anarias, and of the knife he had plunged into my back.

Wolves . . . leopards . . .

"Lions . . ." I muttered, making the word a curse. "There may be an armada waiting for us at the end of our next jump."

"Then we'll fight them," Cassandra said, taking my arm in hers.

The light that filtered from the opening ahead was a pale but bloody red. No air was there on all that world, and so my cloak and the empty sleeve of Cassandra's *mandyas* both hung limp in the void, disturbed only by our motion.

It wasn't right.

There should be wind on such a promontory, at such a height.

There had been, once, if only once, when I had come there with Valka so long before.

The white lozenges of the camp we had constructed at the foot of the mountain so many miles below could still be seen, untouched by dust or

rain. I had walked among them when first we came back to that sere and airless world, and read the stenciled words painted on each black hatchway.

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All was as we had left it on Annica.

Heart of the Quiet's dominion in this world—his dominion-to-be.

Ahead of us on the promontory, the fat-bellied shape of an Ibis-class lander waited, its forward ramp down, rear compartment void of air. Holden was waiting for us, his men seated or milling about. They leapt to attention at the sight of us emerging from the cavern, one snapping shut the twin plates of a pocket holograph projector, the silhouette of a dancing odalisque winking out of existence.

"My lord!" Holden saluted. "You are finished?"

"I hope not, Centurion!" I said, doing my best to let the smile show in my voice. "But we shall soon see, won't we?"

The centurion looked over his shoulder to his men. "I thought these Jaddians could be trusted."

"The Prince of the Jaddians can be trusted, if he has come alone."

A shadow fell across the sun then, as though that bleary red eye had gone behind a cloud. Turning my visored face to heaven, I saw it, moving like a dagger against the sun, blacker than the space it moved through, edges catching the light where it sailed beyond the tops of Annica's thin day.

The *Demiurge*.

The mighty ship was like a spike of adamant, of obsidian edged in red fire, its terraces and buttressed nacelles gleaming in the light. Impossibly huge it was, a hundred miles and more from stem to stern, vaster by far than even my *Tamerlane* had been.

The ultimate power in man's universe . . . and it was mine, though I held it with a mere token force.

The building of it had been the work of long millennia, its design the

work of the daimon, Brethren, and Kharn Sagara's diseased mind. Huge sculptures of men and gods dominated its exterior, their mighty thews upholding towers, hands buttresses, and pylons, as if holding the whole thing together—a Babel built on air, one no god might make low.

"I wish Lorian were here," I said, words only for Cassandra. Even then, I recalled the look in his colorless eyes as just before he turned his back on me, the holograph going dark, leaving me with no choice.

Whatever was coming, whether it was the Imperial fleet entire, or Olorin alone, I would have to face it. My message had been simple, mere text. I'd had no choice but to fire on Ohannes Douro and the ships of the Chantry. I had secured *Demiurge* and the caches of Mericanii weapons. The Latarran fleet was broken, the Vorgossene fleet destroyed. Kharn Sagara was dead. And dead. And dead. And dead. I was alone. Outlawed. Friendless . . . unless Olorin was yet my friend. I had begged him to come alone, my last friend then in all the galaxy, my only ally.

And he had come.

I had given him a set of coordinates, a patch of unpastured space several light-years from the Annica system. The journey had taken the prince decades from his course, caused him to quit the field of battle completely, and to vanish from human affairs.

I had needed to *pray*, to commune with the being that made me what I was, that had moved me like a pawn to the center of the board, and so made me its cataphract, that I might move in all directions.

"I know," Cassandra said, addressing my lament for Lorian. "But we may meet the little man again."

"Yes," I said. "But as allies? Or enemies?" I lay a hand on Cassandra's shoulder as she brushed past. "How quickly can we be in the air, Centurion?"

Holden stiffened. "I took the liberty of starting launch preparations the moment Agent Albé holographed. We can leave in minutes."

"Very good," I said, looking up at *Demiurge* where it transited the disc of the sun. My suit's entoptics cut the solar glare down to something manageable, and so I watched the ship as it seemed to cut the star in two.

It was an omen.

I was not ready to go.

We had been long years in exile, more than a dozen years circling Annica and Annica's nigh-immortal star. Too long.

Not long enough.

To return to the ocean of stars was to embrace the *end*. The end had come at last, as I knew it must—and yet I was not certain I could do it. I had been commanded, upon that very world, that very mountain, to slay the Cielcin, to visit the Quiet's judgement upon them for the crime of turning to his enemies, for the crime of serving the Watchers and the cause of abolition.

They would destroy the universe if they could. They would fail, but not without causing untold harm. This the Quiet had allowed, in the hope that the Cielcin might abandon their way, but after untold generations, they had not done so, and so the hammer must fall.

And I was the man to bring it down.

But was I right? Was *it* right?

The Cielcin were surely monsters, but they were not always thus. The Watchers had only made them so, twisted them from the path they might have walked alongside man . . . or ahead of him.

And yet, had I the right to do as I had been commanded? Did the Quiet have the right to command as he had commanded?

Did it matter? For surely if I failed, mankind would suffer.

I had seen that end, too.

Is this really what you want? I asked in the silence of my heart, listening for a reply in that ultimate music.

But there was nothing. The straining as of silver harp strings was impossibly far away.

No answer.

"Abba!" Cassandra was standing on the ramp, armored in the white of an Imperial officer, only the missing arm and crimson half-robe to denote her from some captain of the corps. She hung onto one of the handles mounted just inside the open door. "Flight officer says we're ready!"

“I’ll be just a moment!” I said.

Demiurge had completed its transit of the sun.

To mount that ramp was to leave my fragile peace for the final time.

I felt every moment of my age then—six hundred years and more—and both deaths.

I had my answer then.

A wind scoured the rocks, blown down off the pinnacle of the peak above, blowing toward me and across me, so that my black cloak was thrown back. So great was the force of that gust that almost I staggered back toward the ramp.

I had my answer, my word from that higher world, and so turned—but unlike Alexander at the doors of Eden, I did not go away laughing.

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CHAPTER 2

DARKMOON AND DRAGON DEVOURING

WE MET LIGHT-YEARS FROM Annica's star, at a prearranged place far from the light of any sun.

The ship that awaited us waited alone, but it was not the mighty warship *Mnemon*, as I had expected, not the flagship of the Jaddian fleet. It was a smaller, faster ship, a thing almost all engine. I knew its like from the scans, had seen a few dozen of them in my time, on Jadd and among the fleet that sailed with us from Ganelon to Perfugium.

I watched from the rear of the hold as the titanic doors began to open, segment after segment sliding aside like the plates in a legionnaire's armor. The noise of their opening filled that mighty hold like thunder, until only a prudence shield held back the airless night. For an instant, I beheld the distant stars, dimmed by the glare of the lights that illuminated the landing bay. Then a shadow moved to block them, and exterior floodlamps activated, painting the Jaddian vessel with light.

It looked like some species of whale, all smooth lines and organic curves, and as it drew near it turned, attitude jets sending out their bursting gases until the vessel's broad side faced us. Its gold-foil sails were long since stowed, folded into compartments along its length. It shone as it came into view, hull white as porcelain.

A dozen of Ghoshal's men hurried about the polished black floor of the hold, waving gleaming batons to direct the approach of the vessel. She crossed our prudence barrier then, and at once the hold was filled with the noise of repulsors.

"We can't be certain they've come alone," said Special Agent Edouard Albé at my left hand, giving word to the thought that plagued me. Prince Kaim surely would have heard of the aftermath of the Battle of Vorgossos,

heard that Kharn Sagara was dead—both the Queen of Vorgossos and the Monarch of Latarra—heard that the alliance that had briefly flowered between the Imperium and the Extrasolarians was shattered, and that I had turned *Demiurge* upon the Imperial fleet, had taken the mighty vessel for myself, and vanished.

“I am quite certain that they have *not*,” I said. “The question, A2, is whether or not we will see the others, eh?”

Young Albé had aged more than ten years in the decades since Vorgossos, having spent much of the journey thence awake. Patrician though he was, he did not look noticeably older, but his boyish charm had visibly eroded, been sanded away. Young he remained, but his youth had become a thing drawn, stretched, scraped thin, until it was a sheet of lacquer peeling in the elements. “If we are attacked . . .”

“We won’t be,” I said, willing it to be true.

“You’re so certain you can trust this prince of yours to keep his word?”

“The men of Jadd do not lie,” Cassandra interjected, flashing the Museum Catholic a green-eyed glare. She was practically Jaddian herself, and Jaddian proud, standing there with her crimson *mandyas* over her Marlowe blacks. But her twin Jaddian braids were gone, replaced by a single, loose rope of hair bound with golden rings.

Edouard replied with his customary blandness, saying, “Neither do the Cielcin.”

The white vessel’s mighty landing peds emerged then, jointed constructions of rubber and steel like the clawed feet of some almighty table. With a hiss of hydraulics, the ship settled on those feet, a crouching dragon scaled in frost.

“Present arms!” cried Captain Ghoshal, the poor country officer who’d had the ill fortune to carry Hadrian Marlowe from Sabratha to Forum, and so found himself enlisted in my mad and incidentally treasonous cause.

The three hundred men Ghoshal had brought to make a showing and so welcome our honored guest moved as one, lance heads gleaming. Somewhere to the right, a cornicen winded his huge brass horn. Its music brought tears to my eyes.

Edouard had commanded the man to play the martial anthem of my Red Company. Its familiar tones took me by surprise.

The Red Company was gone. Gone forever.

Even Lorian was gone.

For a moment, then, I shut my eyes, old Gibson's admonitions bubbling up in me as from an aquifer.

Grief is deep water, dear boy.

Soon the whole galaxy would drown.

The ramp opened, and a dozen mamluk clones issued forth, chrome armored, their sculpted face masks and pointed helms mirror bright, their surcoats the azure of the High Prince, each carrying a leaf-bladed lance in the crook of its arm. Behind these came a cadre of Jaddian officers in the same blue and white, with high black boots and uniforms dripping with gold braid. These were aryabites, warrior caste, and so wore no jointed masks to conceal their olive faces. Each man's hair was black as my own, and oiled like Edouard's. Most wore mustaches and bore chrome pistols and swords of common zircon in their belts.

The sonorous march of my music played on, horn player accompanied by twin-flute and pipes, and by a drummer slow and precise. At a sign from Ghoshal, I advanced, flanked by Cassandra and Edouard, and moved deliberately between the ranks of men to greet these foreign dignitaries.

As I did so, the man himself appeared, dressed like myself in darkest night.

Prince Kaim Sanchez Cyaxares Nazir-Vincente Olorin ban Osroes ban Aldia du Otranto was a man of curious reputation. Eschewing the bright colors and gaudy style of his rank, he dressed in humble black, in armor well made, but hardly grander than that a simple knight might wear. His sole concession to rank was the mask he wore over his handsome, pointed face. A jointed contrivance of gold and polished ebony it was. Gold filigree encircled his flashing eyes and picked out a mustache and inlaid beard.

Behind him came two of his houris, his *alkidarae*. The men of Jadd were expected to hide their faces, to don masks and disappear behind their office. Their women were made to do almost the opposite. Bright paint adorned

their faces, their high cheeks, their lips, their smokily lidded eyes. Bright gems and fine gold chains adorned their foreheads, their throats, and their full breasts, and their gowns of sheerest samite—orange and blue—left but little to the imagination.

Still, I was not fooled. Kalima di Sayyiph was as adept a politician as the prince himself, had indeed masqueraded as a satrap of those far-flung Principalities when I first met her as a prisoner of Count Balian Mataro when I was just a boy, and black-skinned Tiada di Umaz was a swordmaster herself.

More mamluk slaves emerged, accompanied by true human soldiers, *aljanhi* with helmets stowed.

“About face!” Ghoshal roared.

As one, the men turned to face the Jaddian contingent. Reaching the fore, I bowed my head, touched forelock, heart, lips in gesture of greeting.

The martial anthem ceased.

“The hour is dark indeed, but it is made brighter by your presence, Prince of Jadd!” I said in Galstani. Then in Jaddian, advancing almost to within reach of the mamluks’ spears, I said, “It is exceedingly good to see you again, my old friend.”

“It is true, what they say,” said Prince Kaim, responding in his own tongue. “You have indeed been changed, my friend.”

“What has been done to me will be done to all the world.”

“You are beginning to believe, then,” said the prince.

“In my god, Prince”—I shook my head—“not yours.”

Smiling beneath his mask—its plates clicking as he moved—the man I had first known as *Sir Olorin* said, “There is but one god, *mi sadji*.”

“That may be.” Reverting to the Imperial Standard, I said, “Welcome to *Demiurge*, Prince Kaim.”

The great prince made a show of looking round the blackened hold, taking in the ribbed vaults; the tiered arches; the vast, smooth sculpture of the human face whose mouth housed the door by which one accessed the mighty ship from that hold.

The hatch began to close. “This is the ship of the machines.”

“Built by them, yes,” I said. “But it was designed by Kharn Sagara.”

Kaim du Otranto laughed. “Say as well *Katanes built it*, or Merlin, or Orodes! This is a ship of myth, Marlowe. I confess, until your letter, I did not believe it existed at all.” He peered at me, eyes white-rimmed in his black mask. “The weapons of the enemy are real, then, too?”

“If you doubted it, why did you come?”

“Old myths and legends I doubt, *mi sadji*,” said the prince. “But you, I believe.” His eyes fell on Cassandra. “This is your daughter?”

Cassandra, more Jaddian than I, bowed. “*U aftaphar esna lilqarar tuo, Mani Domi.*”

The Prince of Jadd’s smile widened. “The honor is mine,” said he in the same tongue. “You are of the Ninth Circle, are you not?”

“*Si, domi, solo*,” she said. *I am.*

“I am not your prince,” he said. “You need not bow to me, girl. We are both *Maeskolon*.” He touched her shoulder, and it was only then that he marked her loss. “Your arm . . . Have you not the means to regenerate it?” He looked to me. “I will send for my physicians.”

“No!” Cassandra said, more sharply—I think—than she intended. More softly then, she said, “No, my prince. I am all right.”

Prince Kaim looked at me, and I perceived it was my old friend *Olorin* beneath that royal mask. I shook my head.

“Have you no surgeon?” he asked.

“She does not wish her arm restored,” I said. “She has her mother’s stubbornness.”

“And your madness!” He laughed. “It gladdens my heart, to meet you, girl, though I wish it were on happier occasion.” He peered at me, eyes narrow in their golden frames. “You are once again a wanted man.”

I smiled a sad smile. “And yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” Kaim-Olorin agreed. He hesitated, knowing he must ask the next question. “Did you kill Ohannes Douro, and these warriors of the Cult of Earth?”

Looking at the prince who had twice delivered me from the fire square in his masked face, I said, “I did.”

“I see,” said the prince, turning his face aside.

“We should not have come here,” said Tiada, speaking softly.

Olorin raised a hand for quiet. “*Silencio, amara.*” Black eyes returning to my face, he said, “You do not deny it.”

“Fight well, seek beauty, speak truth. Is that not the way of it?”

The prince’s eyes grew narrower still. “You have committed treason. Destroyed an Imperial fleet. Attacked your Chantry! Murdered a strategos —”

“They tried to kill me, Olorin,” I said. “They *did* kill me, on Forum—as I’m sure you were told. But they tried again. Douro, and Kedron. Me. My daughter. My people . . .” My anger fanned to fresh fury. “They turned on *us*! Betrayed *us*! Tried to kill *us*!”

“Lord Douro—” the prince began.

“Tried to kill us, yes!” I almost snarled. “He and the Chantry wanted to take this ship from me.” I gestured at the hold. “This ship is *Death* itself, Olorin. There are weapons in her arsenal with the ability to unmake planets. To unmake *stars*. I could not allow that power to slip into the hands of the Empire—of the Chantry.”

The Jaddian prince looked to Cassandra and young Albé, as if for confirmation. “Are you not a soldier of the Empire?”

“No hand should hold this power,” I said. The fact that Kharn Sagara had held it, had held it for more than fifteen thousand years . . . had held it and *not* used it betrayed secret depths in the man.

Secret wisdom. Secret goodness.

“No hand but yours.”

“Tiada!” Olorin turned, hand raised to silence his woman. “*Kaphin!*”

The woman once again fell silent.

“I can see there is much you have to tell me,” said the great prince. “But first, I would see this ship of yours, and see these weapons for myself.”

• • •

The arsenal lay shrouded in darkness as we entered, its cargo lit from below by pale, blue-fired lamps. So vast it was that no man might spy one end of it from the other. *Demiurge's* mighty arsenal ran for miles along the meridian of that impossible ship, a great longitudinal slit in its underbelly. The room had no true floor, so those who entered it were confined to walk upon the sparse catwalks. Beneath those railed walkways, the mouths of launch tubes yawned, ready to accept the weapons chambered in their cradles amid the gantries high above.

When first I had entered that hideous place, the machines had been barely visible, vague shapes hanging as from titanic gallows. But at a word of command, huge lamps were kindled. They blazed to life in sections, one bay illuminating at a time, so that with each activation the seeming-infinite hallway grew ever longer.

“*Noyn jitat!*” Kaim-Olorin swore.

I understood him perfectly.

The machines were . . . *wrong*.

They were none of them the work of human hands. Iron wills had conceived of them, and iron hands forged their workings, all to serve a purpose even their makers could hardly comprehend.

The Archontic weapons.

Each was a species unto itself, each as unlike the one that preceded it as it was unlike the next. There were those among them larger even than the vessel that had brought the Jaddians—titans of monstrous size—while others were so small a child might not have fit inside. Each hung in its place from the gantries above, some bolted down, others tethered, still more in vessels of pure force.

Here were machines to end worlds. To end *stars*. To shred the quantum foam of space itself. Here were machines to defy physics, to break every natural law. Weapons that violated the laws of thermodynamics, that laughed at the thought that matter and energy should be conserved, that made a mockery of the belief that something could not come from nothing. The very meanest of them could gut a planet like a fish.

“How many are there?” Olorin asked.

“Seventy-two, all told,” I said.

“This is why you went to Vorgossos in the first place . . . what you went to find?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

It was not the question I anticipated, for all its apparent simplicity. I had thought the answer obvious. “To end the war. To destroy the Cielcin . . . and their gods.”

“Their *gods*?” Olorin looked at me, incredulity coloring the face beneath the articulated mask.

Long I sought the truth beneath that enameled mask. “You really don’t know? The Monumentals? The Watchers? The Vaiartu? Nairi? The *Atropos*? Project Perseus?”

Olorin was shaking his head. I looked to Edouard. The younger man shrugged. Was it possible that the spymasters of Jadd had no knowledge of the work that HAPSIS did?

“You really don’t know?” Cassandra was standing at the rail, had turned from her examination of the nearest weapon to face me. “The gods the Cielcin worship are real. Have you never wondered how a race of practical primitives learned the means to travel the stars? The Cielcin have no broad understanding of science. They do science by ritual! They were *taught*!”

“By these . . . gods . . . ?” Olorin asked.

“I have seen them, Olorin,” I said. “Creatures of pure will. Beings from beyond our spacetime, able to manipulate matter and energy at will.” I did not say what they truly were, or that they had been fashioned by the maker of all things before the making of the cosmos.

“Dorayaica has two aligned with its cause,” I continued. “With them it aims to dismantle our Empire, perhaps to unmake the galaxy itself.” Indeed, Dorayaica intended to make war on the Absolute himself, to fight against creation, against existence itself, and so return all the Absolute had made to the nothing it was before.

“You’re serious?” the Jaddian asked.

“These creatures . . . are weapons unlike anything you have ever seen.

The destructive power of the Cielcin war machine is as nothing measured against what they are capable of. That's why we're here, why I went to Vorgossos. To retrieve this ship. These weapons," I said, gesturing at the devices in their creches high above our heads. "I aim to kill the Cielcin gods."

Kaim-Olorin turned away, peered up at the nearest of the machine titans. It had a body like a bronze cigar, surface gnarled and fluted. It was enormous, a thousand feet or more in diameter, and untold thousands long. "We have come a long way from Emesh, you and I," the prince said.

"I have gone much farther," I said. "But I have come back."

Silence, then.

"Earlier, you asked if I was a soldier of the Empire. I have given two lives to the Empire. I have nothing left to give them but this: I will end this war. But I will not do it for the Empire. What I do, I do for all mankind. That is why I asked you here, of all places." The prince was still looking at the Archontic weapon, that massive machine other machines had built. "I mean to offer you a gift, in return for your long faith in me."

"What does it do?" Kaim asked, studying the goliath engine.

I stopped. Orphan had taught me the functions of and theory behind every one of those terrifying instruments. The pilot might have answered the prince better than I, but prudence had decreed I keep the malformed child of the machines hidden away—and Ramanthanu and *my Cielcin* with it. It would not have done to give the Jaddian any more reason for trepidation then.

"The *Bleteira*?" I asked, giving the thing the name Kharn Sagara had given it. "It is a cannon, a mass driver designed to accelerate a lump of neutronium—no larger than you are yourself—to within a fraction of a percent of the speed of light."

"That's impossible!" said Kalima di Sayyiph, speaking for the first time. "That would . . ."

"Give the shot near infinite mass," said Edouard Albé, "that's right."

"It's a star-killer . . ." said Kaim-Olorin, looking up in horror.

"Yes," I said. One shot from the *Bleteira* would impart so much energy

into its target that whatever it was would be blown to atoms, even the largest sun.

“But how?” Kaim asked. “The energy required . . . one cannot simply accelerate an object that much that quickly!” A thought occurred to him, and he stiffened. “Is it atomic?”

It fell to Edouard to answer him. “The firing mechanism relies upon the spontaneous generation of a number of micro-singularities—”

“Micro-singularities . . .”

“Black holes,” I clarified.

Olorin shook his head. “How do you stop them consuming the machine once it’s fired?”

“You don’t,” Cassandra interjected, drawing the prince’s eye.

“It can only be fired once,” I said.

“A star-killer . . .” the prince said again.

“One of several here,” I said. “No two are alike. The very least of the devices here is a gamma-laser projector capable of a beam roughly equivalent to the sum total output of an M-class star.”

The skin about the prince’s eyes grew very pale. “The least of them?”

“You see why I could not let this ship fall into the hands of Douro and the Chantry,” I said.

Kaim swallowed, nodded.

“It is only the Cielcin that have kept our peoples from fighting these last thousand years,” I said. “Once they are gone, the gears of war will begin to turn anew. If I were to hand these weapons over to the Imperium—even if they could not replicate them—how long would it be before this device was aimed at the sun of Jadd? Or of Tavros?”

Those words struck the decking about Kaim’s feet like cannon fire. The silence that followed them was like the slow drift of smoke over carnage. Presently, the prince sighed, and reaching up, undid the silken thongs that fastened his prosthesis in place. He removed his enameled mask and, passing it to an attendant, dragged a hand down across his face, massaging the cheeks and slanting satyr’s brows. “This ship . . . changes the universe forever. You know this?”

The man who looked at me was not the laughing warrior I had met on Emesh, not the lord of Jadd who had rescued me on Ganelon. There was gray in the goat-black of his hair, and lines of care I did not recall etched deep into his forehead. Marks that were not the marks of laughter turned the corners of his mouth. Lines of white like veins in marble showed in his thick mustache and pointed beard.

“If what you say is true—of Douro and the rest—I understand you.” Coiling black hair snaked into his eyes. “Why have you sent for us?”

“I am a wanted man,” I said. “If I could speak with His Radiance, the Emperor, I could make *him* understand—but I do not know where the Emperor is hiding, and I can hardly take an Extrasolarian warship to the Imperial capital without inviting reprisal. I cannot go alone, because they’ll kill me again. I need your help, Olorin. I need you to go with me to Forum. I need your royal protection, your credentials.”

“Diplomatic immunity,” the prince said. “You realize what it is you are asking? This is not like last time, Hadrian. Then you had but insulted your Emperor. Now you have destroyed an entire battle fleet, jeopardized relations with the Extrasolarians, destroyed our alliance with Latarra.”

“There was no Latarra!” I said. “Latarra was only a tool one Kharn Sagara used to slay the other . . .”

“Then they are both dead?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph. “The Monarch and the other?”

Looking up at the dread engine of the *Bleteira* hanging overhead, I said, “There is much to tell.”

Edouard interposed himself. “We’ve prepared a report.”

Never had the Prince of Jadd seemed so old to me. In that moment, he reminded me of nothing so much as the old knight I’d known on Jadd, worn and beaten down by time, wandering the shores of the *Islis du Albulkam* alone, a ghost in black, carried by his blood far beyond man’s right count of years. Lordly and kingly, but ancient, a relic carried before his armies like the bones of a saint.

“Very good,” he said, not taking his eyes from the *Bleteira*. “To

think . . . the weapons the Mericanii built for *our* extinction will be our deliverance.”

“You miss the right of it,” I said, moving to stand beside him. “The machines did not build these to destroy *us*.” Many were the hours I had spent in conversation with the monster, Orphan, plumbing the depths of the knowledge Brethren had given it.

The patrimony of the machines.

“They were made to slay the Watchers,” I said at last. “They were made for *our* war.”

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CHAPTER 3

CONSPIRACIES

FOR A LONG TIME—it seemed, though it cannot have been but a few scant seconds—the only noise was the faint humming of the lamps embedded in the ridged vaults of that high chamber. My eyes slipped from the prince’s face, searched beyond the tall, narrow windows, as if I might find an answer hidden on the statued terraces and machicolations that decorated the cyclopean ship.

We were near the bridge, in a chamber located atop a buttressed spire that overlooked *Demiurge*’s night-black hull. A hundred men might have sat about that massive table. As it was, there were fewer than twenty, my men facing the Jaddians across that expanse of darkness like the pieces at the start of a game of labyrinth chess.

“What do you mean . . . ?” asked Edouard. “The Cielcin . . . *disappeared*?”

“Just that,” replied the prince, drawing my attention from the ranked statues outside. “The Cielcin have vanished. There has been nothing—not one convoy attacked, nor any planet raided—since before you sailed for Vorgossos . . .”

Another of the Jaddians, an *aryabite* man with the markers of a captain at shoulder and throat, interposed. “Their last assault was at Dakara. A minor engagement. Two worldships. The *davoi* made off with some twenty million of the locals at best estimate.”

“Mother Earth and Emperor preserve us,” said Henric Ghoshal. The captain blessed himself, making the sign of the sun disc. “Twenty million?”

There had not been so many people on all Sabratha.

A thought occurred to me then, and I asked, “When did this take place?”

“Seventeen . . .” Olorin looked to Kalima. “Seventeen-four-sixteen.”

Beside me, Edouard inhaled sharply. I had struck my mark.

“What is it?” asked Cassandra from her place at my right hand.

“That’s just six years after Sabratha,” Edouard answered.

“Sabratha?” Kaim-Olorin’s face contracted.

An ill wind blew then through my soul, a chill out of nowhere—and I knew that I was right. “You are . . . aware that the Emperor sent his emissaries to collect me from Jadd in three-nine-five?”

The prince nodded.

“Sabratha was our destination. I had been summoned to assist in the excavation of a site constructed by an ancient pan-galactic civilization called the Vaiartu.”

I was once again astonished to find no flash of recognition in the great prince’s face.

Edouard, evidently, shared my astonishment. “You’ve never heard of them?”

Kaim-Olorin looked to Kalima, to Tiada, to his officers. All shook their heads.

I told them everything then, explained how the Emperor had pardoned me, recalled me from exile to serve him one final time. I told Kaim and his people how we had found the Vaiartu city in the desert, and how the Watcher sleeping there had awakened and stalked us for years. I told them how we were betrayed, and of the death of poor Sir Friedrich. And I told him of Ushara herself, that demon from before the dawn of time, older than the very stars and their shepherd.

One of their shepherds, at least.

And when the prince and his women objected, Edouard himself produced recordings of the incident taken from the suit cameras of several of his men. None save Cassandra and myself had been present in the pantheon of Phanamhara when Muzugara and Kybalion performed the sacrifice . . . but the battle outside? When Ushara erupted like a giant from the sands and filled the sky with the fullness of her terror and majesty? That every man had seen, and a dozen or more cameras captured clearly.

“Stop,” Prince Kaim said.

The holograph projected in a cone of light at the center of the table showed the beast revolving in the sky, wheels within wheels like an astrolabe, its countless eyes glaring.

"I cannot believe this," he said.

"I would not call you across the light-years to lie to you. This . . ." I gestured at the holograph with an open hand. "Olorin, this is madness, I know. But it is the truth."

The prince's fingers went to the enamel mask on the table before him, "And this . . . creature . . . is now in the hands of the Cielcin?"

"It would be more accurate to say the Cielcin are in *her* hands," I said. "They have worshipped her kind since the beginning, since before we left Old Earth."

"And you believe this . . . Watcher is behind the Cielcin's sudden silence?"

"I no longer believe in coincidence," I said.

In the silence that followed, Kaim-Olorin touched the table, tracked his fingers across the surface to play Edouard's holograph in reverse. The image of Ushara as so many banded eyes vanished, was replaced by the sight of her as a pale titan seen at a distance, a specter looming in the night, illuminated by lightning.

"It is almost . . . absurd," the prince said. What he said next was the thing I most feared he must. "Why does it look like us?"

I did not give him the true answer, that he who made man made *them*, and made them first, made them before the Cataclysm that brought forth the *all*.

"The Watchers may take any form they choose," I said. "They can condense matter out of energy at will, and change it back again . . ." I paused, acutely cognizant of my daughter's presence. "I believe she took this form to seduce me."

"Seduce you?" Tiada spluttered. Kalima hid her smile behind her hand, and the Jaddian captains shifted in discomforted bemusement. "You're serious?"

"The Watcher could sense that I had been touched by its enemy," I said.

“It was the Quiet that gave me my . . . abilities. The Watcher wanted those abilities for itself.” More than that, it had wanted to corrupt me, to break me, to make me into its slave.

“Then I am glad it failed,” said Kaim-Olorin, visibly shaken by all that he had seen. “What do you propose be done?”

“This long silence of the Cielcin has given us some advantage. Perhaps we have not lost so much time as I at first imagined . . .” We had come to it at last, the reason I had summoned the prince across kilolights of space. “We must take the fight to *them*. This ship possesses the means to destroy not only the Watchers, but the entire Cielcin fleet.”

Deep had been the silences that punctuated that conversation beforehand, but the silence that followed that pronouncement was deep as the darkness outside.

“The entire fleet?”

“You saw the *Bleteira* yourself,” said I. “That weapon alone possesses the means to destroy a star. There are others in our arsenal that can do far worse. If we can catch the Cielcin flat-footed—wherever they are—we can destroy them.”

“But, my lord,” interjected one of Kaim’s captains, “we do not know where it is the Pale have gone!”

“Now if only our relationship with the Latarrans had not been *compromised*,” said Tiada di Umaz, her dark and darkly painted face growing darker still. “Without their tracking device, we have no means of locating the enemy, not until they attack.”

I smiled at the barb.

“But we do have it,” Edouard said, and rose, circling leftward round the table, until he stood among the empty seats that separated my small party from the Jaddians, his trim silhouette framed by one of the high windows. Behind him, there was nothing but stars.

“*You* have it?” Kaim-Olorin sat back in his seat, amazed. “How is this possible?”

“The Latarrans did not develop any means of tracing telegraph communication,” he said. “The Cielcin telegraph network was designed and

manufactured on Vorgossos, by Kharn Sagara.” He keyed his own wrist-terminal and, closing his fist, gestured as if to cast something at the center of the table. The motion transmitted what the agent had prepared to the table projector: the image of a device—like a great, round tablet—bracketed to a black metal wall. Half a thousand braided glass cables were shunted into ports about its circumference, themselves bracketed or bound with lengths of cord. “Calen Harendotes merely tapped into the network. The Latarrans were attempting to deceive us.”

“Or were themselves deceived,” I put in, thinking of Lorian.

Edouard sniffed, indicated the projection once again: “The Latarran device was only a receiver, one of many designed by Kharn Sagara over the centuries since his first contact with the Pale. Sagara-Harendotes simply manufactured another. That device remains on Latarra, to our knowledge, but there was at least one other on Vorgossos itself, and one aboard *this* ship.” As he spoke, the HAPSIS man fiddled with his terminal. The image above the table advanced, displayed a three-dimensional projection of the galaxy, blue-white stars filling the air. At another command, a cascade of red lights appeared, the preponderance of them clumped like tumor cells along a belt of stars in the Centaurus Arm. “You see them now,” Edouard said.

The prince leaned forward. The look of smug irritation that had colored Tiada’s face was gone. “This is . . . now?” Olorin asked, eyes alight. “This is real time?”

Edouard shook his head. “What you’re seeing is their fleet’s location per their last transmission. This is as near real time as possible. Unless they have made the jump to warp, this is where they are.”

Kaim du Otranto stood unsteadily, the braided cords that bound his *mandyas* to his breast tinkling. “They are massing their forces.”

“Yes,” I said.

“What are those other ships?” the prince asked, indicating a smattering of red points across the galaxy. He highlighted a cluster far to galactic north. “Those there.”

“Other ships,” I said. “Possibly ones not aligned with Dorayaica.”

I had pondered them many long nights in my exile, recalling those princes that had not answered Dorayaica's call to *Aetavanni*. There were other Cielcin in the galaxy. Ones not loyal to the Prophet-King.

You have heard, Reader, how it was that I—the Sun Eater, Palekiller, Starbreaker, Halfmortal Lord of Man—slew every last Cielcin screamer at the Battle of Gododdin.

It is not so.

No victory is clean, no triumph complete—unless it is that final triumph of the Absolute over all, and that you will never see.

“These others—so we think—are scouts,” Edouard said, highlighting individual points of red distributed across the galaxy. “Outriders in service of the greater fleet.”

“They're not attacking . . .” Kaim said, turning to look the agent in the face, hands pressed against the table. He fell silent.

“You see now why I need your help,” I said. “I *need* to speak with the Emperor. It is imperative that I deliver this receiver into his hands, imperative that he learn the truth.”

Kaim-Olorin did not look up. “The truth?” He turned his head, looking long at Kalima di Sayyiph, who silent shook her head. “You have already admitted to killing Ohannes Douro, to burning his fleet.”

“And I would do it again,” I said, “and sooner, next time—knowing what he was and what he wanted. You have not seen what I have seen, O prince. You cannot appreciate what this ship is capable of. I said before: I will *not* let this vessel fall into the hands of any other man.”

“And still you ask me to put you under my protection?”

I did not hesitate. “Yes.”

The prince bent his head over the table, staring down at his mask. “It is not so easy as that,” he said at length. “Your Emperor remains in hiding. I have neither seen nor spoken with him since Minnagara. He sailed to the relief of Halasarna. There had been a battle there . . . and the plague.” He shook his head. “Where he is now remains an Imperial military secret, unknown even to me.”

“Then you must take me to Forum,” I said, drawing nervous laughter

from a handful of the lesser Jaddian officers.

That laughter kindled the ire of their prince, whose eyes cut deep as the swords unkindled at his waist.

“I saw His Radiance at the council,” I said, referring to the gathering of dignitaries from across the human universe that had met in the Eternal City and consecrated our Alliance against the threat of Dorayaica and its Cielcin Empire. “I was meant to speak with him the day after they . . .”

“The day after they murdered him!” said Cassandra, voice brittle.

Laying a hand on her shoulder, I said, “I cannot go to Forum alone, and I cannot go in secret. I will not let this ship fall into the hands of the Chantry, or of anyone who would use the Archontic weapons for anything other than their intended purpose.”

“You really have no idea where the Emperor is?” asked Edouard, returning to stand behind his seat at my left hand.

Kalima di Sayyiph answered him. “He is surely stationed at one of your Legion bases in the inner Centaurine. But which? Perinthus? Phasis? Selymbria?”

“Perinthus!” I exclaimed. I had not thought of Perinthus in centuries. The place had been the site of a minor skirmish, some years after the Battle of Berenike. We had arrived there late, but it had been my Red Company that finally broke the Cielcin siege of that world. Fighting there on the ground, injured, a lone Cielcin had nearly bested me, and only the timely intervention of a common peltast had spared me a second death—if only for a time.

Kaim said, “We can’t know for certain. His Radiance has been all up and down the front. He may even now be in transit.” Seeing Edouard seat himself, the prince resumed his own place. “There are those who say he is dead, you know.”

I shook my head. “I do not believe it.”

“Nor do I,” said Prince Kaim.

“You can’t cover something like that up,” said Henric Ghoshal, pale beneath his heavy mustache. “Not for long.”

“They are saying that his advisors simply continue his efforts, that his

son rules in all but name.” The Darkmoon of Jadd accepted a glass of water from one of the pages.

“We have no wine,” I said, apologetic.

“I do not drink the health of any man with water,” said he, and drank.

“Which son?” I asked, knowing the answer. “If the rumors are to be believed, that is.”

“If the rumors are to be believed,” Kaim said, “variously Matthias, Faustinus—Aurelian himself—and your young friend.”

“Alexander.”

“Just so,” the Jaddian said. “The prince was with his father at Minnagara. I saw him when I wed his sister.”

I had forgotten that. The Princess Vivienne of the Aventine had been given to this Jaddian prince in marriage, the first union between the Princes of the Houses of the Moon and the Solar Throne since Cyrus took Amana for his own.

“William is alive,” I said. “If he is not, then I have no allies, and it is already over.”

“What of Selene?” Cassandra asked.

“She remains with the fleet, wherever it is,” Kaim-Olorin said.

“She cannot help me,” I said. “I need the Emperor.”

“What would you have of me?” the Darkmoon Prince demanded. “My countenance, yes? My support? What will you do? Sail to Forum and demand the Emperor speak with you? Why should he listen? You are a traitor again, Marlowe! Or have you forgotten? The Empire will not care that you have come under a flag of truce.”

“They’ll listen to me,” I said. “Because they need me. I do not need you to convince them. I need you to see me safely to the Eternal City.”

The prince had exhausted his supply of words, and looked round at his men, his women.

“You’re insane!” said Tiada di Umaz. “You wish to use us *a shield*?”

Several of the Jaddian officers stood then, shouting their outrage. More than one put his hand on the hilt of his common sword. Two at least tugged gloves from their sashes and hurled them at the tabletop.

But the Prince of Jadd was unmoved. He raised one jeweled and glittering hand.

Steadily, his men took notice, and noticing themselves, had the grace to look abashed. One by one they hung their heads, one by one regained their seats. Only when the last of them was silent and seated did the prince speak.

“You truly are mad, *mi sadji*,” he said. “You do not know how late the hour has become. While the Cielcin slumber and bide their time, the Lothrians burn my worlds. Thessaloniki. Mariaba. Rhagai. All sacked and burning. And the plague has taken root on the holy planet itself.”

“On Jadd?” Cassandra could not help herself. The Planet of Fire was her home, the only home she had ever seen until she sailed for Sabratha with me on my last fool crusade.

“Yes,” said Kalima di Sayyiph. “Corruption spreads now even in the gardens of the moon.”

The thought of the *lethovirus* spreading in the crystal halls and beneath the singing trees of the Alcaz du Badr filled my heart with sorrow. I pictured the water gardens empty, sans the laughter of children; imagined courtiers disfigured by plague beneath their masks.

“That is *why* the Cielcin are waiting,” I said. “They but hope your *Domagavani* will withdraw your fleets to defend your own worlds, and leave the Empire to rot.”

“You think I am not knowing this?” Kaim asked. “You think yourself the only player on this board?”

“What of your grandsire?” I asked. It was the thing I should have said first.

“Alive!” Kaim said, smiling sadly. “He is alive, Ahura Mazda be praised. I am told he spends his every waking hour in the temple with Atash. The God’s Fire will keep him clean of corruption.”

“I pray you are right . . .” I said.

“And Master Hydarnes?” Cassandra asked.

Kaim offered her a sad smile. “I do not know. I will inquire if it is your wish, *mancara*.”

Cassandra nodded, laid her one hand on the table, and looked down,

gripped by fear for her dear teacher.

“If you will not help me,” I said, studying the prince, “why did you come here?”

“To help you, Marlowe,” the prince said. “To convince you to surrender. If you do, you may yet get what you want.”

“If I surrender, I will die a third time,” I said, “and all my people with me. And this ship will fall into the hands of the Empire.”

“Then give it to me,” Kaim said. “Go to Forum alone. Remand yourself to Aurelian. Surely he will deliver you to your Emperor. You cannot help yourself crouching on the borders of space like some common pirate.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “I will not go to Forum in chains.”

“Then I cannot help you!” Kaim said, standing. “Tiada is right. I should never have come here.”

“You don’t understand!” I said, standing myself. “You don’t know what happened.”

“Then tell me!”

“I intend to,” I said, gesturing for the man to sit. “Please.”

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CHAPTER 4

THE KING TWICE DEAD

“WE HAD NO CHOICE,” I said, having carried the story so far as the death of Brethren, the loss of Cassandra’s arm, and the destruction of the geothermal plant that powered the city beneath the ice. “We had to act quickly if we were to secure *Demiurge*.”

I’d made no mention of Valka’s replica, nor of the creature Orphan—nor had I made reference to Ramanthanu and the handful of Cielcin warriors who had entered my service. Olorin had ever been my ally, my friend, and yet faced with the reality of *Demiurge* and its Archontic weapons, I could not trust any prince of the world not to wish to take the vessel for himself, and Orphan was the key to *Demiurge*.

The others had been silent for the great part of my narration. Edouard and Cassandra had interjected in their proper places, illuminating their parts in the wider struggle, as had Captain Ghoshal and the Irchtani chiliarch. The Jaddians listened intently the while.

I had told him everything of the Latarran court, of my confrontation with the Monarch that first day there, and how Kharn Sagara had revealed himself, and held my people’s lives for ransom. I told him how I had slipped a warning to the Princess Selene when she left with her brother to muster forces to assist us in the siege of Vorgossos, and how we sailed to Merope, and there met with Ohannes Douro and Knight-Commander Kedron of the Chantry Sentinel Fleet. Succinctly as I could, I recounted the initial siege of Vorgossos, how we had disabled her engines and sailed through the planet’s vasty catacombs to reach the gates of that deathless burg. There we had attacked the house of Kharn Sagara itself. I spoke of the forced betrayal of the Interfaced, their minds raped by the demon queen. I spoke of the Tree of Life, and Calen’s true plan: to abandon the singular

incarnation model he, Kharn Sagara, had enjoyed for fifteen millennia. I shared with Kaim how hundreds of Kharn's clones had been awakened from their dreaming, and battled the witch-queen, their sister.

And I told him of my own clone, and how for centuries the Lady of Vorgossos had copied and tortured me, hoping to unlock the secret of my power. Kaim-Olorin halted me, asking, "He duplicated your consciousness?"

"Yes," I said. "Up until the point at which he had imaged my mind. That was when I was a boy, not long after I left you on Emesh."

"Such devilry . . . it is beyond me, beyond all of us on Jadd."

The Jaddians were themselves cloners, masters of the genetic science. They had doubtless cloned me themselves, relying upon the samples I had freely given them. But the duplication of my mind, my memory . . . that required praxis not employed on Jadd.

Duplication. Profanation.

Abominations, both.

"I would have put the whole place to the torch," said the Darkmoon Prince.

"That was already being done," I said. "The Latarran Grand Army was yet carrying out its Monarch's orders." Camillus Elffire had been instructed to leave none alive, for any man, woman, or child might secretly serve as an escape vector for that *other* Kharn, the woman who had attempted to destroy the man who would be king.

"We dared not try to stop Elffire's massacre. Any delay increased our risk of losing *Demiurge*. From Brethren, I had secured the command keys necessary to capture this vessel . . ." In truth, I had acquired Orphan. "We took shuttles and escaped the city, telling no one. Not Douro. Not Kedron. Not our Latarran allies."

Not Lorian.

I had not dared risk it. The capture of *Demiurge* was the lynchpin upon which all depended. Not merely the Battle of Vorgossos, but the whole of the war. It was not that I distrusted my friend, I distrusted his allies.

"*Demiurge* had been under Brethren's direct control. There was none

aboard to challenge us. No skeleton crew. No garrison.”

With Orphan on board, it had been a small matter to command the ship’s automated defenses to stand down.

“We took the bridge without contest . . .”

. . .

I had never stood upon the bridge—the *true* bridge—of *Demiurge* before, but I had seen it, and more than once . . .

. . . in my visions.

Situated far forward in the forecastle, among the cathedral spires and flying buttresses that crowned *Demiurge*’s bow, in one of the sections built perpendicular to the axis of thrust, so that it might experience true gravity when the sublight engines were engaged. The chamber was more like the throne room of some splendorous palace—huge and hideous—than it was like even the bridge aboard *Tamerlane*. Mighty windows, true windows—wrought of alumglass and vast as tennis courts—made up the forward wall, so that one might peer out as from the topmost level of a tower, past the outer spires and bristling comms equipment to the void beyond.

“Are we discovered?” I asked, advancing on the towering windows, nursing the long, thin scratch on my forearm.

Far below us—ahead, though it seemed—the white face of the planet turned, its countless crevasses gleaming pale green, its thin skies filled with dust and vapor where the bombs had fallen. Even as I watched, we came upon the wreck of her engines, drives vast as continents, a great slit carved into her surface by the labor of millions of Dorayaica’s Cielcin over I dared not guess how many hundred years.

Vorgossos.

“No,” came the answer I had looked for. The pilot’s answer.

“Not discovered,” said the copilot.

“Not yet,” the pilot replied.

Standing almost up against the glass, I peered down, and doing so

peered back along the length of the ship toward engines a hundred miles away. I could remember walking along that length—the hold in which we’d landed had run parallel to the axis of thrust, not far from the vast garden that ran along the middle of the ship, beneath its faceted glass roof. *Demiurge*’s decks ran every which way. There were sections parallel to thrust, forever cushioned by suppression fields, and sections at angles to it, like the bridge. There were even sections that rotated, imitating gravity after the fashion of other Sojourners, ships like Lorian’s *Mistwalker*.

The ship was madness.

“You have control?” I asked, watching the pilot’s reflection in the glass. The man had assumed the command chair, a massive throne on a dais in the center of the high chamber. Two dozen legionnaires stood guard around it, clutching their lances in nervous hands. They were HAPSIS men, all of them, survivors of the Battle of Sabratha.

The copilot, flaxen haired, spoke in his high, clear voice. “The ship is yours, Master.”

The black-haired pilot chimed in, “The ship obeys us, and we obey the Master.”

“Is Cassandra safely aboard?” I asked. They had patched her up aboard *Gadelica*, but I had ordered that she be ferried aboard as soon as possible. I wanted her near me, and the pilot had insisted the black ship’s auto-surgeons would be better able to tend her wounded stump than any Imperial physician.

Edouard spoke. “Yes, lord. Not five minutes ago. She’s en route to medica now.”

“Very good,” I said. “Neema is with her?”

“Yes, lord.”

I returned my vision to the palely gleaming, battle-scarred planet beneath me. Vorgossos might have been a Cielcin worldship, with its engine trench and the vast sublight drives built into craters on its surface. How had I not seen them when first I’d come to that black planet?

No sign there was of the other ships then, no sign of Douro and Kedron and the Imperial fleet. No sign of *Mistwalker*, nor of the rest of the Grand

Army of the Monarch, nor any trace of the defenders of Vorgossos—unless it was the intermittent flash of some explosive on the planet’s surface.

“It’s almost as if there’s no battle at all,” I said.

“There’s something deeply wrong about it, isn’t there?” Edouard agreed. “War should make thunder.”

I nodded tiredly. The fingers of my right hand still played with the scratch on my arm.

“I should have worn my armor.” But the armor was filthy, covered in the grime of Brethren’s lake. I had left it for Neema aboard *Gadelica*, aboard *Ascalon*, tucked safely inside the larger vessel’s hold.

Edouard looked upon my wounded arm. “Are you ready?”

“If we are ready,” I said, looking down at the two bodies where they lay beneath black cloth. Annaz stood over them, the black-feathered birdman leaning on his long rifle like a staff.

“We are prepared,” the pilot confirmed.

“Good,” said I, standing straighter, black cloak swirling. “Where shall I stand?”

“It matters not,” the copilot said.

Above and behind the command chair and its central dais, the rear wall of the bridge was dominated by an almighty frieze. Men like gods played upon its surface and flexed their mighty thews. Scenes of murder and of copulation played out for hundreds of feet of black stone, creation and destruction comingled. The very smallest human figures were large as true men, but there were figures larger still. Twin giants flanked the doors to the bridge, each with a nude woman slung over his shoulder, holding her with one hand while the other nursed his erect phallus. Beneath them, women fled the grasping hands of men, or fell beneath them, or opened to them. Black figures wrestled in embraces equal parts terrified and amorous. Here one man strangled another, his loins buried in those of a kneeling woman. There a man lay dying with a sword in his ribs. Breasts and thighs and buttocks shone in the harsh light of the place, and giants wrenched back the arms of nymphs whose backs arched in terrible ecstasy, while above it all a

giant human face—that of a woman, it seemed to me—looked serenely down, a naked boy seated on her shoulder.

It was a vision of hell to me, and—I thought—an idealization of the creature that had designed the ship itself. For surely here was Brethren, that seething mass of humanity, that leviathan of many bodies with the daimon Cheyenne for its head.

Following my gaze, Edouard scowled, made a warding gesture, touching forehead, breast, and either shoulder. “This is an evil place.”

I did not argue with him.

I had been sent to force evil to serve good.

I squared myself against the glass so that the white arms of Vorgossos shone behind me. Better them than that hideous statuary. I let my cape fall about my shoulders, shut my eyes a moment, permitting myself an instant of that rest-of-mind that has taken the place of sleep for me. “Prepare to broadcast on all frequencies,” I said, not opening my eyes. “I want them all to see.”

“Broadcasting.”

A faint hum filled the air, and through my lids I discerned a pale, blue light. Opening my eyes, I saw them: a fleet of drones like gleaming eyes, each perhaps a little larger than an egg, black bodied, blue eyes gleaming. Without needing to be told, I knew that these would move with me, follow me as I moved about that vast and echoing bridge. They orbited me as worlds about their star, each scanning me in real time to transmit my holograph to every ship in-system—Sollan and Latarran and Vorgossene alike.

One by one out there, the others would receive our transmission, my appearance delayed across the light-seconds. I knew what it was they saw: tall and kingly, raven haired and raven clad, a Lord of the Empire in all but fact, for I was lord of *nothing*. Once, I had worn the white cape of Empire, of a servant of Empire. Then I wore unheralded black, without even the pitchfork and pentacle that had been my badge for so many centuries. My black-as-ink hair, which fell then almost to my navel, was gathered in a ring at my left shoulder, and my hands were bare.

“My Lords of the Sollan Empire,” I said, speaking in a voice of *command*, “Men of Latarra, of Vorgossos . . . I am Hadrian Marlowe.” Here I paused, permitting the recipients time to render my transmission. “Repeat: This is Hadrian Marlowe. I have seized control of the *Demiurge*. Vorgossos is fallen. Kharn Sagara is dead. Calen Harendotes is dead. It is over. Cease fire immediately.”

It was strange. I expected a chorus of angry shouting, of denials and denunciation to follow this proclamation, but there was nothing. I stood alone upon an empty stretch of floor before those mighty windows. The lords and captains of three realms that might address me were, in truth, a million miles away.

“As we speak, the forces of the Monarchy are burning the city down below. The planet is crippled. It will never fly again. To the captains of Vorgossos, I say this: Surrender—here and now—and your lives will be spared. Pending inspection, I will allow you all safe conduct to whatever port seems best to you. Attempt to flee, and you *will be destroyed*.” I let these final words hang upon the air like the smoke of cannon fire.

What came next would break the world.

“Men of Latarra, you were deceived. Your Monarch was not what he claimed. You have been unwitting pawns of the Lord of Vorgossos. From the beginning, your nation—your New Order—existed only to restore your master to his place. Here.” At a sign, Annaz reached out with one clawed foot and drew back the cloth that covered the body of the Monarch at my feet.

The golden corpse was riddled with holes. Its heart was gone, and one dead eye . . . relics of the beam weapons that had cut flesh and metal like sunfire. There was remarkably little blood. The whole of his body beneath the neck was wrought of ceramic and gilded steel. Hydraulic fluid, white as milk, stained his black cape. Only the head had bled. There was dry blood in the matted darkness of his hair, and on the banner of Vorgossos that Annaz and his Irchtani had wrapped about the body.

“Here he lies,” I said, turning the head with the toe of one boot so that the orbiting cameras might see. “His sister-self beside him.” Gathering the

hem of my cape, I stepped over the body of the slain Monarch as Annaz revealed the body of the other Sagara.

What perverse impulse had prompted that Sagara to so plastinate her flesh, I cannot understand. What remained of the girl called Suzuha was only a withered husk, a mummy preserved with the brain intact.

No more.

I had killed her myself, had cloven her head in two.

Standing between the two bodies, I turned. I fixed my eyes on Vorgossos. “The planet is ours. To the captains of Vorgossos, I say again: Surrender, and your lives will be spared. Resist . . . attempt to flee . . . and I will have no choice but to unleash the barest fraction of the destructive potential of this warship.” I tucked my thumbs into my belt, squared my shoulders, all in an effort to conceal the exhaustion that threatened to consume me entire. “You have one hour.”

I turned in a swirling of black, gestured to the pilot and copilot that they should terminate my transmission. The cluster of orbiting holography drones dispersed, each one breaking orbit at a tangent. “Pilot!” I said. “If you detect any of their ships attempting to initiate the jump to warp, deploy the Archontic weapons. We cannot let a single vessel escape until it has been searched.”

Edouard was standing over the bodies of the Monarch and the witch-queen. “The Archontic weapons? Is that necessary?”

“Another Kharn Sagara may already be aboard any of those ships,” I said, thrusting a finger in the direction of the planet. “For every one of him that escapes, there will be another Latarra. Another Vorgossos to threaten the galaxy. You know the evil that he is capable of, Edouard. You saw a piece of it down there.” My blood was up, and I was sick with the memory of the palace of the Undying, of the Tree of Life, the Garden of Everything—of what he had done to *me* with his Angelus Project. “‘*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*’ Is that not what you preach?”

The Museum Catholic fell silent.

“Get me Lorian!” I said.

The copilot’s high voice cut across my command. “We are receiving a

transmission.”

“The Vorgossene?”

The pilot’s deep voice answered. “The broadcast code identifies the point of origin as the *Imperial Service Vessel Bradamante, SDN-04732.*”

Lord Douro.

“Of course,” I said, tucking my chin. I had not told Ohannes Douro anything of what had transpired on the surface, nor warned him of my intention to seize *Demiurge* myself. I had not wanted to risk any complications. Any transmission we might have sent to our Imperial allies could have been intercepted—and the last thing I wanted was to cede even a share of the control of that ship’s hideous strength to the Chantry. “Put him through.”

Lorian would have to wait—though it pained me, and cost me all.

The swarm of holography drones once more descended like a school of silverfish, lens eyes spitting light as they revolved, locking into pattern so as to sketch the image of a man in the air.

He might have been standing there before me, so solid was that projection: a man in legionary blacks. Lord Ohannes Douro, Fifth Stategos of the Legions of Orion, Baron of Anarias, stood clutching the hilt of his highmatter sword where it hung from his right hip.

“Lord Marlowe, explain yourself!” he demanded without preamble, every inch the Old Lion of the Imperium. Copper skinned, well built, his black hair going gray, the Baron presented as an officer of high honor and ancient dignity.

Kharn’s silverfish drones had fallen into formation about myself as well, co-orbiting us both as though our heads were twin suns. Throwing back my cape, I said, “The day is ours, Lord Baron.”

“What happened down there?” he asked, glowering at me with eyes like coals.

“What you see,” I said, gesturing to the bodies of the king twice dead. “Harendotes betrayed us, but he overplayed his hand.” I explained what had happened in Sagara’s laboratories: how Calen Harendotes had shattered his crown into a thousand shards. “You must shoot down any ship attempting to

leave Vorgossos, do you understand?" I said. "Tell Kedron: The Vorgossene fleet will need to be impounded and searched. He and his cathars must inspect every circuit, every man."

Ohannes Douro's scowl worsened as I spoke. "*We must, must we?*" he said. "And pray, how do I know *you* are not one of this Sagara's *afterlings*? Tell me that."

"Look at me," I said. "Am I not the same man you met at Merope?"

"The same man that had been a prisoner at the court of the Monarch for how many years?" Douro asked.

I smiled at that. I had been called a creature of the Extrasolarians since I first returned from Vorgossos, and had expected this pass. Lord Douro was no stranger to the antics of the Extrasolarians. Though he did not look it, he was an *old* soldier. During the rendezvous at Merope—before we sailed for Vorgossos—he had let slip that he'd first taken service during the reign of Victoria X, who was William's grandfather's grandmother. That had been more than three thousand years prior.

Relic of another age was he, dusted off, thawed out for our war to end all wars—and more—I think now that he had been selected, by the Chantry perhaps, to play the part of Nemesis. He *knew* the Extrasolarians, their methods, their praxis.

He had been chosen to do exactly what he did—what he tried to do.

To wrest *Demiurge* from me.

I do not blame him, nor do I blame the Chantry—black though their hearts may be. The Cantor, Samek, had slain me. They knew that for certain. And then I had appeared on Latarra, at the court of Calen Harendotes. Doubtless he believed I had been caused to put the paper in Selene's hand that revealed the Monarch's true nature, that I had only been the bait in some trap—and that the trap was still closing.

I did not doubt his sincerity. His patriotism. His sense of duty.

It was only that I could not trust him, or his black-robed and blindfolded friends.

I had nothing to say to his charge. To object would not be to appear innocent.

“Prepare to receive a Chantry examination team,” Douro said.

“That won’t be necessary, Lord Baron,” I said. “The situation is well in hand.”

“Unacceptable,” Douro said.

“We have more pressing concerns at the moment,” I told him.

“There are no more pressing concerns than that warship,” Douro said. He appeared to turn on the spot, feet slipping on the mirrored black floor. His mouth moved, and he made a slashing gesture with one hand, but by turning his back he had moved out of his holograph detection cone, and so was silent a moment, a gray shape on the air.

“We are receiving a transmission,” the pilot said.

The copilot took over, “Point of origin: *Chantry Sentinel Ship Argentine*.” He rattled off the serial number.

“Kedron,” I said.

I was between the hammer and the anvil, then.

“Put him on.”

The orbit of the silverfish rippled, widened, made space for a third man. The Chantry Sentinel Knight-Commander Kedron was a great bull of a man, utterly hairless and deathly pale. Kedron wore full armor, black as midnight, with the eclipsed sun of his order blazoned on his chest. The disc of that sun was black as the rest of armor, rimmed in white light, but even on the holograph I could see the continents embossed there, black on black.

It was the face of Mother Earth.

He smiled wolfishly. He wore the black band of a cathar across his eyes, that strip of muslin which permitted him to see out, but no man to see within. “Lord Marlowe.” The Prince-Prior’s voice was, if anything, deeper and rougher than Lord Douro’s. “Congratulations on your victory. The king is dead, then?”

I looked to Kharn’s twin bodies, muttered, “Long live the king . . .”

“I pray not,” Kedron said, speaking as Douro returned his attentions to our conversation.

“Kharn Sagara yet lives,” I said. “The Harendotes variant duplicated himself onto every waiting replica on the planet. There are hundreds of

Sagara afterlings on Vorgossos. It may be he has already broadcast copies of himself offworld. There may be variants aboard the Vorgossene fleet—or the Latarran, for that matter—or both. We must act quickly, secure a peace with Vorgossene. Hold the Latarrans here.”

Douro scoffed. “The Latarrans will never submit to inspection.”

“Nor should they,” I said. “I have just given them every reason not to trust us. I apologize for my deception, Lord Baron, Sentinel Commander, but I had no choice. The death of the Mericanii daimon of Vorgossos left this ship entirely undefended. If I had not acted quickly in seizing it, we ran the risk of the Vorgossene or Latarran fleets moving in. Had I not acted as I did, either our enemy or our erstwhile allies might have seized this vessel with nary a fight. With your permission, I would like to call in Commandant General Aristedes. He will help us secure the cooperation of his people.”

Douro slashed the air with a hand. “His people! As of your broadcast, *his people* no longer exist. Without their Monarch, the Latarran center cannot hold.”

“All the more reason to act now!” I said. “Let me bring Aristedes in. He can hold the center.”

Ohannes Douro shook his head. “My Lord Marlowe, with all due respect, Aristedes is a fine enough tactician—he performed most ably here—but you overestimate his potential. The man is misborn. He is no leader.”

“Have a care, Lord Baron,” I said, fixing the old soldier’s holograph with a glare to freeze even my Lord Father’s blood. “Lorian Aristedes is a finer man than any I have ever known.”

The Old Lion gave a diffident sniff.

“Let me call him,” I said.

Neither Kedron nor Douro spoke. I thought that I had at least fended off their own assault for the time being. Let them worry about Sagara—they *should* worry about Sagara.

Demiurge’s bridge was unsettlingly silent. The copilot signaled for my attention.

“Transmission?” I asked, raising a hand to silence interjection from Douro or Kedron.

“From the Vorgossene fleet,” the copilot responded.

The pilot spoke over his counterpart, “Shall I patch them through?”

I eyed Douro, Kedron.

Douro nodded.

The figure that appeared among us in that instant towered over even gleaming Kedron. I did not think him all machine, though it was impossible to be certain, for every inch of him beneath the neck was sheathed in a suit of silver foil, its surface inlaid with cords and tubing, and broad hoses swung freely beneath his arms, attached to junctions in his chest and belly. Silvered armor there was bracketed to this suit, jointed pieces that flexed like fishes’ mail. Almost eight foot tall was he, his proportions stretched so that he was longer and thinner than any man ought to be. The black lines of nerve implants showed about the frame of his pale face, coloring his jaw and cheeks.

He bowed, the light catching in his short-cropped, oil-black hair. “Lord Hadrian Marlowe,” said he, speaking in an accent like the accent of the lords of the Imperium. “I am Fleet Captain Acastus Kozar, of the Free Captains of Vorgossos. It falls to me to offer our surrender.”

Lord Douro did not miss a beat. “Very good, Fleet Captain. I am Ohannes Douro, Fifth Strategos of the Legions of Orion, Baron of Anarias. I accept your surrender.”

Kozar turned, seeming to notice Douro and Kedron for the first time. The chimera’s eyes grew wide—they were polished chrome, as though mirrors had been set beneath his eyelids. “You sail with the black priests of Earth,” he said. “What assurances can you give that my people will not be slaughtered?”

“You are defeated!” said Sentinel Commander Kedron. “Your survival depends upon your cooperation.”

“Sir.” Kozar smiled. His teeth were steel. “That is no assurance at all. We are yet six Exalted Sojourners, twenty-one major battle cruisers, sixty-three destroyers, one hundred nineteen frigates, and one hundred eight lesser warships. Three hundred seventeen vessels in all. If you will not

guarantee my safe conduct and the safe conduct of my inferiors, we will fight you.”

Undaunted, Ohannes Douro said, “Yet you are willing to surrender.”

“To Lord Marlowe,” said Captain Kozar. “If he truly commands *Demiurge*.”

“I do,” I said. “If you and your captains will surrender yourselves here aboard *Demiurge*, no harm will come to you. Upon my word as lord.”

Douro was too well-bred an officer to publicly object. I knew I would receive an earful the moment Kozar broke comm, but it did not matter. It was imperative that the Vorgossene navy be pacified as quickly as possible.

Acastus Kozar drew himself to his full height, lifted his chin in posture of pride—it was a Cielcin gesture of submission. “Name your terms.”

• • •

“What were your terms?” asked Prince Kaim du Otranto from his place across the table.

I had been looking out the tall windows of the conference room as I spoke. “An immediate cessation of hostilities, of course,” I said. “I demanded the Vorgossene fleet power down primary drives and disengage warp cores. I made it clear that they would be boarded in turn and inspected by Kedron’s people. Any vessel caught communicating with anyone other than Douro, Kedron, or myself would be subject to summary destruction.”

“And Douro?” the prince inquired.

“Furious,” I said. “I’d usurped his authority. Kozar surrendered to *me*, not the Empire, not him. *Me*. He couldn’t let that stand.”

While I’d spoken, I’d set the hilt of my sword upon the tabletop, its graven ivory shape chased with iridium, the metal coruscating where it caught the light. The face of the simurgh on its pommel stared up at me with one eye of polished jet. I turned the weapon in its place, admiring it as I so often did, and rested my elbow on the edge of the table, my chin in my hand.

“Kedron objected to my bringing the Vorgossene aboard *Demiurge* at all—quite correctly—but we had little time,” I said. “Kozar was set to come aboard within the hour, and I needed to prepare.”

“And Lorian Aristedes?” asked Prince Kaim. “What of him?”

I blinked. “That was the worst of it, Olorin,” I said. “I called him, but he did not answer.”

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CHAPTER 5

IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

"IMEMNEU O-OKARIN'TA NE?" ASKED the creature standing at my right hand, the tip of its horned crown nearly two cubits above the top of my own head.

"Trust them?" I asked, watching the darkness beyond the open hatch for the arriving shuttle. "The Extras?"

"Your people," said Ramanthanu, eyes black as the space between the stars.

I did not answer it, but turned to examine my paltry retinue.

Agent Albé had remained on the bridge with the pilot, had sent me with two decades of HAPSIS men under the command of a man called Archil. These were supported by as many Irchtani warriors under the command of Annaz's second, the black-and-green-feathered Inamax. But it was Ramanthanu and its three remaining kindred that stood nearest me. Egazimn, Otomno, and Bikashi were—with their captain—the last of *my* Cielcin, the last of that small number that had sworn fealty to me amidst the Battle of Sabratha.

Did I yet trust anyone? Anyone other than Cassandra?

The door that led to the corridor at our backs opened, and a man in bright Jaddian silk shuffled in. "*Jitaten makanna.*" He looked askance at the door he had entered through, located in the eye of a man's face carved in relief upon the wall, so that it seemed the skull of some giant lay half-sunken in the floor. "I cannot abide this ship, Master Hadrian. I cannot abide it at all."

"Neema!" He was very nearly late. "How is Cassandra?"

"Resting, poor girl," he said, smoothing the front of his open blue silk vest. "Resting, yes. The ghastly machine that calls itself a doctor says she

will be fine, but she is unconscious. It induced her to sleep while it treated her for possible infection.” He shivered.

“Very good,” I said, and gripped my left hand with the right, squeezing the fingers to feel the bones beneath. I had spent some time in the medica myself, recovering from my brush with death and the loss of my own arm following the battle against Aranata Otiolo all those centuries ago. It had been the ship’s iron surgeon that had rebuilt my own arm, printing the bones from adamant, growing new flesh.

That new flesh and printed bone were gone, replaced by the new flesh the Absolute had given me, but the memory remained—the memory and the impulse to feel the lattice ridges of the old false bones beneath the skin of my hand.

“Poor girl . . .” Neema said again. “She may be a holy terror, *domi*, but I shudder to see her in such circumstances. Her poor arm.”

A pilot light flared to life among the ramparts beyond the open hatch, heralding the arrival of the Vorgossene delegation. Beside me, Ramanthanu straightened, four slit nostrils flaring as it and its kinsmen drew up about Neema and myself.

“*Rakanyi ti-saem-gi*,” the lop-horned captain said.

They are here.

The air was filled at once with the noise of Archil and Annaz shouting their men to order. An instant later, the night gave birth.

The Vorgossene shuttle was a perfect sphere, its gunmetal surface pitted and scratched by decades of micrometeor impacts. Hypergolic attitudinal thrusters were fixed at intervals around its circumference, little holes like pockmarks blackening the surface.

It stank of brimstone, as all things brought in from the dark of space must.

Neema drew back at the sight of it, clutched a kerchief to his nose.

As we watched, the vessel orientated, relying on repulsors like wire inlay. Then a half dozen slivers opened about the lower face of the craft, pushed outward, became legs like the legs of spiders, and settled on the floor of the hold. The whole sphere was perhaps forty feet in diameter,

larger than the average Imperial shuttle. Still, the size of the hold dwarfed it, so that it seemed a lone pearl in the bottom of an otherwise empty jeweler's case.

The pilot had scanned their vessel on approach and found it safe, but still I readied myself for some trick, some trap. Almost I expected the entire thing to erupt in white flame. An AM bomb was nearly impossible to detect. A bubble of antihydrogen in magnetic suspension would appear as little more than air to even X-ray spectrography, and yet contain enough destructive potential in a mass the size of a pea to blow the ship to pieces.

An instant later, a section of the spherical hull opened, and a ramp folded down. Fleet Captain Acastus Kozar appeared at its top, his black hair neatly combed, his silver spacer's suit gleaming beneath his armor. He had donned a black cape for the occasion, one that fastened at the right shoulder. Behind him, there followed a collection of his fellow posthumans. The man at his right—if man he was—appeared like a walking suit of armor, his limbs too narrow for human flesh to lay hid beneath. A creature like a bloated infant floating in a bell jar followed on, its jar riding on four legs like the legs of dogs.

Only the woman at Kozar's left hand seemed fully human. With her gold complexion and shining, blue-black hair, she might have been Mandari. Tavrosi, perhaps, though I saw no clan *saylash*. She smiled at the sight of us waiting for them.

Kozar himself seemed more surprised, and paused on the ramp, his hand going to the catch of his shield-belt.

Beside me, Ramanathanu's hand went to the *nahute* coiled at its belt beside the hilt of its sheathed scimitar.

"You keep strange company, Devil of Meidua!" said Acastus Kozar.

"These are strange times, Fleet Captain," I called in response. "Have you come to surrender?"

Behind these four strange captains, I saw a small knot of Extrasolarian troopers—essentially human in body plan—waiting to debark.

Kozar took his hand from his belt. "If you truly command this ship, I can do nothing else."

“You know what it is capable of, then,” I said.

“Better than you!” said Kozar, reaching the bottom of the ramp. “It is nearly five thousand years I have been in service to the Undying. I have seen it used.”

Used. In what ancient war and context had the Lord of Vorgossos unleashed the Archontic weapons, and on whom? Sagara had known of the Watchers, had faced them before, at least once, when the Mericanii lord called Crowninshield had summoned the one called Selarnim to Vorgossos of old.

Had there been another time? Had Kharn Sagara slain a god himself? And more than one?

“You will have to tell me about that,” I said.

“Perhaps,” said Kozar. “May I introduce my companions?” He gestured to the man like a suit of armor. “This is Captain D-307 Aleph, of the *4B-65CC7-Eta-9E3-Gimel-4*.” He pivoted, indicating the creature in the tank. “This is Here Soonchanged, Captain of the *Azoth*”—he turned then to the woman—“and Captain Nebet Hut, of the *Kite*. Together, we represent what remains of the Free Captains of Vorgossos, all vavasors of the Undying who is dead.”

“I thought this day would never come,” said D-307 Aleph, voice utterly without inflection. “It is as though a star has gone out. What was fixed is scattered. What was unmoving moved. You have won a great victory, Devil of the dread Empire. I am not certain you appreciate *how* great.”

The crabbed and swollen infant in its yellowed pod spoke, and its voice was like the grinding of old stones in the bowels of some world. “You are like a man who—finding a fence in the wilderness—tears it down to clear the land, and doing so releases a lion from its pen.”

“And a leopard and wolf as well,” I said, undaunted.

“Lord Sagara told me of your proclivity for Dante,” said the thing called Here Soonchanged. “But you are not wrong. Did you think your Emperor the only stabilizing force in our galaxy? Sagara was a wall against the sea. Now the water will rise.”

I took a step forward. “You mean he held the various factions of the

Extrasolarians in line?”

“Them,” said D-307 Aleph, “and other things.”

I had an impression then, a sudden image of Kharn Sagara standing atop the curtain wall of some castle, just visible in the light of some antique fire. Outside, it was very dark. Abruptly I recalled the tale I had told poor Cat as she lay dying in the gutter of Borosevo, that of young Kharn and his City of Poets.

Those who will not live by the sword will die by one.

He had been more than any sorcerer, that I had always known. Kharn Sagara had been a king, the yellow king of Vorgossos. A warrior and a warlord. But what wars had he fought out here, in the dark between the stars—and against whom or what had he struggled?

My image of Sagara transformed in that instant, as he turned into the firelight, became a radiant figure, a warrior of sunlight. I saw him then for what he was. He was one of the *almosts*, the *might-have-beens*, the *never-weres* . . . a champion of the light fallen into shadow, twisted by vice and fear. Had he but learned to walk the path, there might have been no need for Hadrian Marlowe at all.

Here Soonchanged cut across its ironclad companion. “Do you even know what this ship is for? Who built it, and why?”

“He knows,” said Captain Nebet Hut. She was still smiling, one eyebrow raised.

Ignoring its compatriot, Here Soonchanged said, “It is a god-killer, forged by half-gods. It is not for common men.”

Once more Nebet Hut interrupted her infantile companion. “He is no common man, Here. You know the stories.”

“Yet he is only human . . .” said the shriveled creature, utterly still within its tank. “He could . . . become more.”

“Enough!” I said, raising my chin to face Acastus Kozar. “You and your people will remain aboard and under guard for the duration of the peace process.”

“That was not part of the deal!” said Acastus Kozar, steel eyes narrowing as he drew back a step.

“I am the author of the deal,” I said, turning my head to highlight the presence of my Cielcin, my Irchtani, Archil and his men. We outnumbered the Extras some five to one. “You will transmit orders to your ship: Anyone not absolutely necessary to the maintenance of your ships must be placed in fugue until further notice. Until then, the four of you will remain our guests.”

“Your hostages,” said Acastus Kozar.

“If you will but surrender your weapons, my people will escort you to the gardens, where we may discuss matters in greater comfort.”

Nebet Hut’s smile had not left her face. “We know the way.”

I studied her, looking for some clue in her pointed, high-cheekboned face. She wished to remind me that this was *their* place, that they were its lords, its captains, and I the ill-fit conqueror.

Kedron was right, I realized then, and bitterly. They should have gone to *Argentine*, to *Bradamante*, to *Gadelica*—to any ship but this. Any one of them might—that very moment—have been weaving some spell, touching the ship’s mind with their own.

Admit it, Valka’s shade whispered in my ear, you know nothing of praxis.

A fear settled on me, and the sense that I was very, very far from home.

Here there be monsters.

“Your weapons, please,” I said.

Acastus Kozar turned to his companions. D-307 Aleph’s sallet-helm of a head with its slit-visor turned smooth as any gun turret, nodded with a whine of servos. Here Soonchanged scuttled in place on its four pointed limbs, bubbles rising from the lips of the bloated infant in the tank. Nebet Hut—still smiling—bowed.

The lanky giant turned, hoses swinging from his silvered foil suit. Twitching his cape aside, Acastus Kozar unslung his belt. From it swung a chromium pistol—akin to the one the Minoan sorcerer Gaizka had wielded—and the hilt of a highmatter sword. Recognizing the stamp of Sollan handicraft, I said, “You were a knight.”

The chimeric giant smiled, revealing his metallic teeth. “Half an Empire ago.”

One knight to another then, I nodded, and received the shield-belt with gracious hands. "I shall keep them safe, sir." I had decided I liked Captain Kozar, if the same could not be said for his companions. I passed the belt to Neema, who draped it over his arm.

"My own weapons are not so easily parted from me," said D-307 Aleph.

"You are all machine?" I asked, studying the living suit of armor. A pattern of human arms entwining circled its own arms, embossed and gilded on the dull steel, so that minutely realized hands spread fingers on its pauldrons.

"Save the brain," it said. "Though you would hardly call it such."

"What assurances can you give me that you will do no violence, then?"

The machine-man contemplated his answer a full second before replying. "None."

"Then we will have to make special accommodations for you," I said, and turning to the HAPSIS contingent, said, "Centurion Archil, wave A2, tell him—"

I never did finish the thought.

An alarm blared, shrill and high and so piercing I thought my head must burst. I put my hands to my ears, then to my sword and shield-belt, sensing some trap, some trick from the captains.

There was none. Not from the four gathered before me, at any rate.

The whole of *Demiurge* shook with distant thunder.

"We take fire!" Annaz croaked.

"What is happening?" asked Here Soonchanged in its sepulchral tones.

I had my answer in the next moment, for Edouard Albé's voice sounded through the comms patch behind my right ear. "My lord, it's the Vorgossene fleet!" he said. "They've opened fire on us."

"Neema, go!" I said, thumbing the catch on my shield-belt.

Acastus Kozar's mirrored eyes were twin pools of quicksilver round as the shuttle he'd come in. "What is the meaning of this?"

The alarm blared a second time.

"You tell me!" I said, hand on the hilt of my sword.

The giant shook his head. "I know nothing."

“Those are your ships firing on us!”

“What?” Kozar turned to his companions. Neither D-307 Aleph nor Here Soon changed gave any sign.

But Nebet Hut was still smiling.

“Nebet, what have you done?”

The Mandari-seeming woman shook her head. “I’ve done nothing.”

A third alarm sounded.

I drew my sword. A spike of flowing crystal, blue-white as milk, sprouted from my hand. “Archil, Annaz! Take the captains into custody.”

“My lord!” Kozar turned to regard me. “I swear, I know nothing of this attack. By the Rock of Aebar, I swear it.”

I’d no notion what the *Rock of Aebar* might be, but I did not doubt the man’s sincerity.

Thrusting the point of my blade in his direction, I said, “On your knees, Fleet Captain. Order your men to stand down.”

Behind him, the twenty or so armed guards that had accompanied the captains had all tensed and raised their guns. My own people had raised weapons, taken aim. Neema had run for the door.

“Lord Marlowe,” Edouard’s voice intruded, hazy in my ear. “The enemy is not responding to my hail.”

I allowed my eyes to drift closed for half an instant. The battle was joined, then. The fight I’d hoped to prevent had come.

Always forward, I thought. *Always down . . .*

“Return fire.”

A moment passed. If our guns reported answer, I could not hear them. The alarm rang out. The vessel shook.

“Our shields are holding,” Edouard reported.

In most vessels, the shields drew power from a graphene capacitor array, rapid charging, but rapidly depleted. *Demiurge*’s shields were something else entirely. So vast was that mighty vessel that she housed not one, but three antimatter fuel reservoirs. The greatest lay astern, athwart the mighty engines, while the second lay far forward and supplied the ship’s battery of directed energy weapons, and the third—and smallest—powered the

shields. Those shields would hold against any assault, even the starfire of a sun's corona.

"It's a distraction," I said.

"A distraction from what?" asked Edouard.

I had my answer a moment later.

A shot resounded in that echoing hall, and an instant later, a man crumpled to the deck.

It was Archil, the HAPSIS centurion.

"He was shielded!" said one of the other hoplites.

A laugh rang out then, high and cold and terrible—and terribly familiar.

It took me a moment to identify its source, and its source in my memory. I had heard that laugh uncounted times, but ever in the mouth of a man. "On your knees, boy! Surrender!"

It was the *boy* that did it, that brought the last piece clicking into place.

"My men are armed with gigawatt masers," said Nebet Hut, shouting in the raw quiet that followed the alarm blast, shouldering her way to the fore. "Your shields won't save you."

Nebet Hut was no Mandari name.

But Captain Nebet Hut was no Mandari.

"Sagara," I said, looking the woman in the face.

Fully five of the twenty guardsmen trained their weapons at me.

"Always a step behind," said the reincarnate Lord of Vorgossos, drawing Captain Hut's sidearm and pointing it at my face. "What finally made the connection in that sponge you call a brain?"

"Nebet Hut," I said. "Nephthys. Sister of Osiris. You can't help yourself."

"And *you* are too late to help yourself," Sagara said. "You slew the Brethren."

"Her time had come."

Sagara arched one eyebrow at my use of the feminine.

"Lord Sagara?" Acastus Kozar stood straighter. "You survived? Nebet was one of your hosts? A plant?"

Not turning her face to so much as look at Kozar, she aimed the gun and

fired.

The giant toppled like a tree. The wages of five thousand years of service to the Undying was death.

“You should have fought on,” Sagara said, voice cold as ice. She aimed square at my chest. “You thought you could take my ship from me.”

“I *have* taken your ship from you,” I said.

Nebet Hut—Kharn Sagara—bared her teeth in the same, square-edged smile that belonged on the face of Calen Harendotes.

She fired.

To the outside observer, it must have seemed that Hadrian Marlowe vanished entirely, was vaporized by that ray of killing light. The beam struck the rear of the hold, punched a hole in the sculpted black face of the titan. Then Hadrian Marlowe reappeared. Not where he had been, not in the path of the beam, but three cubits to the left and as many nearer his assailant.

Blade in hand, then, I sprinted at the woman.

Her eyes wide as saucers, she swung the beam weapon at me.

I vanished again.

I had come within perhaps five paces of the woman that had been Nebet Hut.

Other Hadrians had come within three. Within one. Had broken left. Right.

Another instant passed. An eyeblink. A single unit of Planck time.

Hadrian Marlowe was gone, and the shocked Sagara ceased firing.

I moved across time like a wave, crashing on that crowded hold. The greater the chaos of the fighting, the greater my sea of options. Every motion, every decision made by every combatant in that place made ripples, eddies, currents in the waters of time—currents I alone could swim against.

To Ramanthanu, to Annaz, or the suit camera still recording the last light poor Archil ever saw, it must have seemed as though Hadrian Marlowe simply flickered in and out of existence. The truth was stranger, far stranger. The truth was that as the chaos of the fighting grew, the chances that I might be *anywhere* in that room intensified. With every shot, every shout,

every spent heatsink striking the blackened deck, my range of possible aspects grew.

I appeared before two of Kharn's defenders. My blue-white Phaian blade flashed once, twice. Both men fell dead.

By then the Cielcin had let fly their *nahute*. By then the Irchtani had taken wing. As I turned to pick my next target, I saw one of the birdmen tumble from the sky, his wings afire. One of Kharn's troopers caught sight of me, took aim.

I leaped aside, moving neither left nor right, but *across*, sliding through potentials until I was *behind* the man who'd fired on me. He never saw the blow that felled him. His head—stuck in his close-fitting gray helm—struck the deck.

"Shoot him!" I heard Nebet Hut's stolen voice exclaim. "Shoot him! He's just a man!"

Another shot clove the air where Hadrian Marlowe had stood an instant before, and an instant later another man fell by the sword. I had accounted for nearly half of the Vorgossene escort by then, and my own people were closing in. Ramanthanu leaped upon one of the Extras, scimitar flashing. Kharn Sagara retreated a step, strafing her beam across a trio of HAPSIS legionnaires. The men fell at once, armor smoking, flesh dissolving where the beam blazed through them.

I appeared once more amid a knot of Vorgossene defenders, saw a shot from one of Archil's men coruscate off one of the Extra's shields while a *nahute* battered at another. My sword rose, and men fell beneath it.

All the while, the alarm still blared, and Edouard shouted reports into my ear. Blood ran red upon the black floor, spreading like wine. I stepped again, moving across time—striking another of Kharn's troopers as I went.

It was over as quickly as it had begun.

I emerged from the waters of time like a fish leaping from the sea, alighted upon the ringing metal floor of the hold, blade shining in my hands. A cold fury was on me, and a hatred black as space. The warnings of the captains had faded in my ears, drowned out by the dull thunder of my own heart. Kharn Sagara was evil, and evil wanted destruction.

“Surrender!” I called, blade vibrating in my fist.

Kharn Sagara stood alone, dressed in the body of a poor woman who had, perhaps, never known she’d been bred to be his host. She was surrounded by yards of open space . . . and dead men.

“Sagara!” I shouted, compelling her to turn. “For the last time, *surrender!*”

The woman who had been Nebet Hut faced me with eyes wide and desperate and furious.

“Order your fleet to stand down!” I said, thrusting the point of my sword in line with her face. “Do it, and I will spare your life!”

The woman tossed back her head and laughed—and as she did so her blue-black hair came half-free from its bonds and tangled at the back of her head. “My life!” she echoed. “You think it is yours to offer? You think you have it in your hands?”

“You can’t escape,” I said, looking to the shuttle.

“I don’t have to,” said Nebet Hut. “One of us will, and more than one.”

“You won’t!” I said. “You are nothing but a memory, Kharn Sagara. You died a thousand lifetimes ago.”

For a moment, I thought that I could see the man inside the woman. The Monarch, Harendotes, with his square grin; the elder Kharn, old Saturn devouring; and the shadow—faint as whispering—of the boy Brethren had showed me, the child Crowninshield had brought to Fort Grissom after the sack of Omelah and its City of Poets.

The boy his mother had carried.

“You keep saying this,” said Kharn Sagara, will yanking the woman like a marionette, “but *if* I am a memory, I am in your memory, too.” She smiled. *He* smiled—and it was the grin of the damned. “And memories never die.” Nebet Hut’s smile stretched wider still, and she convulsed, fell as one with seizure.

She was dead before she hit the ground.

CHAPTER 6

THE SOLDIER ON THE BRIDGE

“SUICIDE?” ASKED PRINCE KAIM.

“To the extent that Sagara is capable of such,” I said, peering up at the holograph display. It had showed footage of the battle in the docking bay, was now frozen on an image of Nebet Hut’s corpse, her face composed in a rictus.

“But why?”

“Because recapturing *Demiurge* was not Nebet Hut’s role in the plan.”

“The plan?” Kaim echoed.

“The plan,” I said again. “Recall, Calen Harendotes returned to Vorgossos, *not* to reclaim it, but to destroy it utterly. The Harendotes variant no longer desired the strict continuity—incarnation to incarnation—that his predecessors had enforced from the first. In place of one Kharn Sagara, there would be many. This, he reasoned, would increase his chances at immortality. For one of his clones, at least.”

Edouard took the baton from me, saying, “So long as it remained, Vorgossos would legitimize *any* scion’s claim to be the genuine or the primary Sagara. So it had to go.”

Prince Kaim tapped the table with his fingertips, his hand splayed. “You think this Nebet Hut incarnation wanted to use *Demiurge* to destroy Vorgossos completely?”

“At minimum,” I answered. “I believe Sagara would have destroyed this vessel as well, dismantled his legacy and disappeared into the night.”

Once more Edouard interjected. “I had my people examine the scion’s body,” he said. “It is our belief that the Hut variant did not even attempt to broadcast its thoughtform.”

“Truly a suicide, then?”

“A gambit,” I said, knowing the prince to be more than passing familiar with the culture of labyrinth chess. “A pawn sacrifice. If she succeeded in taking the ship, all to the good. If she failed, she had at least distracted me for a time.”

“Distracted?” Kaim’s black-eyed gaze flicked from Edouard’s face to my own. “Distracted from what?”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” said the HAPSIS man, reaching up to massage his eyes beneath his lenses.

Kalima di Sayyiph leaned forward, her many bangles tinkling. “I am not understanding,” said she. “This Kharn Sagara can possess the bodies of those he had prepared for himself?”

“With the necessary praxis, yes,” I said.

“Why did he not have one aboard this ship?” asked she.

“We asked ourselves the same question,” I said in answer. “We’ve searched the ship. We can’t be certain—*Demiurge* is massive, as you’ve seen—but we found none.”

Edouard rapped the tabletop with his knuckles. “We believe—I believe—that what the Vorgossos Sagara most feared was a hack by the Harendotes variant. A receptive host aboard *Demiurge* was not a strength, you see, but a potential weakness. It might have been possible for Harendotes to broadcast his thoughtform aboard without a fight, and so gain the ship and the whip hand over Vorgossos itself.”

“And you’re certain there’s no one aboard?”

“We’ve been here for decades,” said Captain Ghoshal. “I’ve had my men all over every deck, up and down every tower of this unholy place. If there was something . . . we’d have found it.”

Kalima di Sayyiph frowned, nodded.

“It seems strange to me that Sagara should so sacrifice one of his incarnations,” said Kaim-Olorin. “After all the trouble he went to securing his immortality again.”

“The Harendotes scions are a different breed,” I said. “The ones we fought in the depths . . . this Nebet Hut variant . . . they were all willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause. Hut was a pawn sacrifice. She was one

of—we believe—two scions that attained the fleet in orbit. The other remained with the fleet itself and directed the attack against *Demiurge*. That one did not dare attempt to flee for fear that we would deploy the Archontic weapons if we detected a warp signature—and we *do* have warp-capable weapons, Olorin.”

The prince blanched. “You what?”

I understood his fear perfectly. For all of Imperial history, seventeen thousand years and more, superluminal flight had been an absolute defense against attack. To escape to warp was to escape entire.

No more.

I offered my thinnest smile.

“But they must have known they could not take the ship by force,” Olorin objected.

Nodding slowly, I turned to Edouard, “I think you had best take matters from here, Albé.”

The HAPSIS man let out a rush of air. “Yes,” he said, and removed his spectacles.

Presently he began to speak, words polished by his Delian accent slipping from him one by one at first, then faster. “Sagara was attacking on multiple fronts. The Vorgossene fleet, the false surrender, the Hut variant . . . these were all distractions. There were still—for all we knew—hundreds of Sagara’s scions on the planet itself . . . and they were *not* idle . . .”

As the man spoke, Neema entered the conference chamber, made a sign. I nodded, and the Nemrutti manservant returned with a carafe and began the work of recharging our water glasses. I drank deeply, forcing the poor fellow to circle back around.

“I was on the bridge . . .” Edouard said, and after a long breath, began again.

• • •

I was on the bridge. Hadrian had gone down to meet the captains from Vorgossos—but this was before their attack. I was waiting, only waiting, watching out the forward window, breath frosting the glass inches from my nose. I could see nothing! Only the Dark outside. The battle . . . it was as if nothing was happening at all. Behind me, my men stood tense. I could hear their armor clinking, shared their nervousness.

“A2, sir,” said Centurion Lado, using my formal code. Lado was helmed, fully kitted. “Security says they’re in position. Shuttle’s just arrived.”

“Good,” I said to him, not turning from the great beyond. “Keep me apprised, and have the other teams ready to move in.”

The man saluted and withdrew.

“No word from the Latarrans?” I asked, addressing the pilot.

“Silence on all comms,” he said. “There is nothing from the Empire, either.” A moment passed. “If securing this vessel is your primary objective, we would do well to depart this place at once.”

It wasn’t my decision, and so I said, “We have more than one objective.”

“If Lord Marlowe intends to annihilate Sagara completely, Vorgossos must be destroyed.”

I turned to look at the pilot, caught his eye through the holographs projected above the well between us: a broad, half-sphere depression in the floor at the center of the bridge. Vorgossos itself hung in the air between us—not quite an egg, its surface cracked and veined with canals and canyons miles deep. About it shone countless red stars, indicators marking the location of the ships gathered all round the world. They looked like sparks. The map showed our location at the very top, high in polar orbit and alone, while the bulk of the Latarran and Vorgossene ships were strung round the equator. The Chantry’s ships had broken away completely, while Douro’s ships engaged the outer mass of the Vorgossene fleet further out in the night.

There must have been thousands of them, ranging from the largest Extrasolarian Sojourners down to the smallest lightercraft: Peregrines and Sparrowhawks, Ibis shuttles and Shrike boarding craft.

To stop Sagara forever, not a soul could leave Vorgossos alive. That seemed to me too high a price, and I asked, “How many people are there? Down on the planet?”

“More than three million,” the pilot said.

I had been on the planet—in the infernal city—for only the barest instant, when I pulled Lord Marlowe and his team out. I’d seen the aftermath of the Latarrans’ butchery. The blood in the streets.

“So many?”

“It is fewer than there were,” said the pilot. “All things die. Your Empire contracts. So does Vorgossos. Man may fly high, but only for so long.”

Lacking an answer, I removed my glasses.

An alarm shattered the uneasy stillness on the bridge. Not the steam whistle of the bridge alarm. The main alarm: a great, black bell whose ringing shook the whole ship beneath our feet.

Demiurge rocked.

“We are attacked!” the pilot said.

I reeled, restoring my attention to the holograph. “Is it the planet?”

“Yes.”

I punched my comm. “My lord, it’s the Vorgossene fleet! They’ve opened fire!”

But Hadrian did not respond.

“Fear not,” the pilot said. “Our shields are holding.”

“Open a channel!” I commanded. “Audio only! All frequencies.” I rounded on the window, waited for the pilot’s mark. The tide of battle was rushing in to crush us where we stood. We’d had the ship for a matter of hours, and we were already about to lose it.

The pilot gave its sign, so I said, “Vorgossos Fleet, this is the *Demiurge*. Your Captain Kozar and his companions are in our power. Cease all hostilities here and now, or we will be forced to consider them prisoners of war.”

There was no reply.

I repeated my warning.

Nothing.

I tried my comm again. “Lord Marlowe,” I said, “the enemy is not responding to my hail.”

Lord Marlowe’s reply, when it came, was strained. “Return fire,” he said.

“Open fire,” I said to the pilot, and shut my eyes. There was nothing to see out the window, and in my mind, I watched lightning flash out across the void. The cloister bell rang, and the whole of *Demiurge* rocked.

“Shields are holding,” the pilot said. “All systems blue.”

I relayed the news to Marlowe on the comm.

“It’s a distraction,” he said.

“A distraction from what?”

“Alert.” It was the voice of the ship itself, flatly masculine. “*Weapons fire detected in docking bay C-31.*”

“What?” I tapped my comm again. “Lord Marlowe! Lord Marlowe!”

There was no reply.

“Give me internal security!” I said, rounding on the pilot. I went to stand by one side of the holography well as a window opened, showing what passed in the docking bay. The moment the image came on, I saw Hadrian vanish, appear a dozen paces off as he cut down two of Captain Hut’s defenders. “Security!” I addressed the detail I’d posted outside the docking bay. “All troops! Move in!”

“Aye, A2!”

On the display, the docking bay was full of fire, weapons filling the air. One shot came close to the camera, nearly whited out the display.

“We should deploy the Archontic weapons,” the pilot said. “The shields will not hold . . .”

I knew the pilot was right about the shields, but I would not sanction the use of the machine weapons without any other choice. It was fear, you understand? Fear of the weapons themselves, of what they meant—what they would mean—for the war, for the galaxy, for mankind as a whole. Because I knew that djinni could not be put back into his bottle.

“Where is the Imperial fleet?” I asked, studying the map projection. I

found them again, far away and beyond the orbits of Vorgossos itself. Too far.

“Your Lord Douro has once again engaged the enemy.”

“Without Latarran aid?” I studied the map. The Latarran fleet was still in orbit, unmoved.

“They will be overmatched.”

On the holograph, the battle in the hold had ended. Captain Hut was dead, and the security team was streaming in. As I watched, the sole survivor of the Extrasolarian embassy—Captain Soonchanged—was escorted out under guard. All the while, the bells were ringing, and the ship shuddered beneath my feet.

“It was Kharn Sagara,” Marlowe said on comm. I couldn’t see him anymore. He must have left the hold. “He’d hidden himself in one of the captains—a woman. She’s dead now.”

“You’re certain?”

“That one is dead, at least,” he said, “but I am certain of almost nothing where Sagara is concerned. It doesn’t make any sense, Edouard. If he wanted to take the ship, why did he reveal himself the moment he arrived?”

I didn’t have an answer for him, but ventured a guess: “Is it possible that however it is he transfers his consciousness has addled—”

“The shuttle!” Marlowe said, shouting over me. “Edouard, the shuttle! Vent the hold!”

Too late, I relayed the order.

Nearly too late.

The pilot had heard, had not hesitated as I. Watching the holograph, I was treated to a brief glimpse of the spheroid shuttle as it was lifted from the deck by the shock of decompression. Its legs still extended, the vessel tumbled out the open hatchway and vanished into the night.

The next instant, a light brighter than any sun flooded the hold and the holograph. A moment later it was gone, the camera vaporized and the whole of the shuttle bay with it. A peal of thunder shook the vessel all around me.

A bomb, I thought.

We had scanned the ship, found nothing.

Stupide! I thought. *Stupide! Stupide!*

I had forgotten the first principle of interstellar warfare, the very first thing they drilled into every one of our heads in the academy. Every shuttle, every lightercraft, carried an explosive more than powerful enough to threaten even the largest battle cruiser.

“They must have overclocked the reactor,” I said. The very ship they’d sent to sue for peace had been a suicide bomb. Only Marlowe’s quick thinking had saved us.

Half saved us.

“Marlowe!” I said, shouting into the comm. “Marlowe, are you all right?”

Still no reply.

I tried again, tried a third time.

Nothing. Silence.

He could not be dead. *C’était impossible!* He *had* left the hold, hadn’t he? And his guards with him?

“Damage report!” I said, shoulders bunched.

The image above the holography well shifted, showed a wire-frame model of *Demiurge* herself, a bottomless cathedral, spires extending in all directions from the superstructure. Damaged sections shone in red. The pilot recited the list of the damages, but I read the holograph myself.

The exterior hull had borne the brunt of the explosion, and—being adamant—had held. But the open door of the hold had acted like a channel, and nuclear fire had rushed in, vaporizing whatever remained in the hold. Hardware. Cargo. Men. The rear walls of the hold were shattered, the halls beyond emptied. Hadrian and his guards had made it past the inner hall, but had they gotten far enough?

“Life signs?” I asked the pilot.

It was the ship that answered me. “*Report,*” it said, “*sensors in forward docking cluster are offline between B-Deck and E-Deck.*”

“Radiation from the blast is interfering with internal comms,” said the pilot.

I glared at the pilot a moment. “Lado!” I rounded on the head of the

bridge security team. “Get your men together, and get down there. Find Lord Marlowe!”

“Yes, A2.”

Another barrage rocked us then, gunfire breaking on our shields. The pilot said, “We should deploy the Archontic weapons.”

“No,” I said, thinking of the terrible things in the hold below. I had gone to see them with Lord Marlowe right after we’d seized the ship. I could not shake the feeling that to use one of them was to open a seal that—once broken—could never be restored. The pilot had said that many of them possessed thinking daimons, wills of their own. “Prime the forward battery. Return fire!”

“*Alert: Incoming transmission,*” the ship declared, reciting a ship code. It was *Bradamante*.

The floating holograph projectors spun down from the arches above, light cones projecting the image of a man in legionary black. It was Ohannes Douro, the silver badges and braids of his rank dripping from shoulders, throat, and breast. His brows arched. “Agent Albé,” he said, “where is Lord Marlowe?”

I did not dare tell him the truth. “Gone to deal with our situation. Their surrender was a trap. The Vorgossene shuttle was programmed to overload. We’ve taken damage. I don’t think it’s severe, but—”

Douro’s face darkened. “I told Marlowe not to trust these barbarians. He should have forced them to tender aboard on our own ships.”

“Yes, Lord Strategos,” I said. I’d no stomach for argument.

“They should have come aboard *Bradamante*,” he said. I remember his face changed then, became almost . . . warm? “Are you in need of assistance, son?”

“We managed to eject the shuttle before it could do any great harm. The damage is localized to that docking cluster.”

Douro’s eyes narrowed, and he gave me a little nod. “Have you injured?”

Another barrage broke against our shields like thunder.

“We’re still taking fire,” I said, deflecting. “We need support.”

“We are en route to your location,” Douro said. “Can you hold?”

“I think—” I looked to the pilot. “Yes.”

“Good,” he said. “I will send a detachment to join you on board. Pilots. Engineers. Medical crew.”

I have no love for the Chantry myself. Mother Earth is . . . a false god. But I was—I remain—a soldier of the Empire. Douro was my senior, though I am intelligence and he was military. I did not like to work against him. “That isn’t necessary, my lord,” I said, forging ahead, “We have the personnel. We must focus our efforts on containment, I . . .” I hesitated, not sure if I should continue. “Sagara was among the captains that came aboard.”

“Kharn Sagara?” Douro was surprised.

“One of him. A woman,” I said. “She is dead. She intended to retake *Demiurge*. She failed.”

“Damn this he-she business!” Douro snarled. “Damned degenerate!”

The steam-whistle alarm blew in the dark above my head, high and shrill. It made me jump.

“What is that?” Douro asked.

I ignored him, looked at the pilot. “What now?”

“We have new contacts,” the pilot said.

“What?” I hurried cross the floor to the well, projector drones spinning in my wake. “Where?”

Douro’s image floated after me, sliding across the floor. “Albé, report!”

There was nothing. The Latarran fleet was still holding position in orbit, while Douro’s group had broken off its engagement with the Vorgossene fleet.

“Where . . .”

“Alert: Multiple objects detected emerging from the planet’s surface.”

I saw them at last. They were displayed as minute points of light—like sparks. *Mon Dieu*, but there were so many! A thousand! Two thousand! More!

“What are they?”

The pilot’s reply was like a shot. “Missiles.”

“Shoot them down!” Douro’s command filled all the bridge, louder than the whistle of the alarm, louder than the bells. He must have seen them on *Bradamante* as well. “Whatever they are, shoot them down!”

I relayed the order, and the pilot obeyed.

“Kharn Sagara is moving,” I said.

Our battle was not one fought between four armies—Latarrans and Sollans, Free Captains of Vorgossos and Lord Marlowe’s merry men . . .

There were five. There was the planet itself. Kharn Sagara himself.

Our weapons swept through the Vorgossene rocketry. But there were too many. Far too many.

“Brace for impact!” I said, certain the weapons were meant for us.

There was nothing to hold onto.

But the missiles shot past us, burning into the night. The light of one near us shone through the high windows, blackened the shadows. Not a one of them struck us, and from the image on the holograph, I saw they were rising in all directions, spreading out around Vorgossos, launched from all over the planet’s surface.

Then the first of them exploded. I saw the flash out the window, like lightning at night. Another followed an instant later. A third. A seventh. A seventieth. Bright stars streaked by. One passed our bowsprit, so close that a man hanging from the ship’s spires might have reached out and touched it. The invisible beam of one of *Demiurge*’s guns tracked it. Destroyed it.

Every one of them was dying, even the ones we hadn’t hit.

“They’re destroying themselves . . .” I said, watching in shock and confusion as light flashed through the high windows, every light death.

“Albé!” Douro said. “Report!”

There was nothing to report.

“Albé!”

“Report,” said the ship’s metal voice, “*multiple gamma-energy signatures detected.*”

The holograph was already showing me what I needed to see. The rockets had not *exploded*. They’d been explosively dismantled, each blast designed to disguise . . . what?

Gamma-energy signatures . . .

Holograph windows opened showing enhanced, false-color images. The objects carried by the exploding rockets were perfect spheres, each a cubit or so in diameter and black as *Demiurge* herself. They had no propulsion systems, no external instrumentation. Only a small, round lens.

They looked like eyes.

Communication lasers.

"It's not an attack," I said. "It's an escape. He's trying to escape."

"Sagara?" Douro asked, image still following me around the holography well. "Impossible! On those ships? They're too small."

"For his body," I said. "But his mind?"

This was why the Free Captains had been made to offer their false peace. *This* was why they had come aboard, why they had attacked Lord Marlowe in the hold, why they had detonated their shuttle. *This* was what the Kharn Sagara that had died in the docking bay had been willing to die for.

Immortality.

Not for herself, but for the whole.

I returned to the window, to Lord Douro's ghost. "They're transmitters!" I said. "If you can hold the Vorgossene fleet in-system, we will handle the swarm. I—"

"You'll *handle* it?" Douro said, unable or unwilling to mask his contempt. "Agent Albé, you and that fool, Marlowe, let the enemy on board that ship!" He was almost snarling. "You do not know these Extra demoniacs like I do!"

My hand was on my crucifix beneath my tunic. I was praying, offering my fear and my fury to God, the Father Almighty.

"Where is Lord Marlowe?" Douro asked. "Albé, are you listening to me? Where is he?"

"Dead!" I said, whirling. I admit I was pleased by the look of surprise on the Fifth Strategos's face. "He was in the bay when the shuttle blew."

Douro's eyes shone. Surprise? Relief? I think now it was relief. Then he sobered, composed himself, said, "We have a battle to win." Then he vanished.

“We do,” I said after he was gone.

My own reflection was staring at me, half a ghost in the window glass. I could see the shrapnel of Sagara’s gambit filling local space. The light of each explosion illuminated every fragment, every shard of metal and glass.

If Marlowe *was* dead—if he was *truly* dead—then his command fell to me.

The swarm had to be destroyed.

“Pilot,” I said, having said another prayer, “is there a weapon in the arsenal capable of destroying the swarm?”

The answer came quickly. “Yes.”

“Then use it.”

The voice that had risen up was not my own.

A man stood just behind the pilot’s seat, one hand on its back. He was lit from behind, so that his shadow stretched across the hall like the hand of a sundial. All black he was, a shadow among shadows, like half a ghost. Then the flash of fire in the night illuminated him, and I saw his eyes were cold.

But he was alive. His lictors stood behind him, their . . . captain at his right.

“Deploy the Archontic weapon.”

“Aye, my lord.” The pilot gripped the arms of his chair, said, “Deploying *Albedo*.”

Somewhere deep in the ship below us, a seal was broken, chains rattled, and hell itself was unleashed. A hatch opened, and the weapon issued forth.

One of the least . . .

The pilot had primed it without my knowing, prepared it against our need. Once clear of *Demiurge*, its housing—a box like a giant coffin—opened and released the thing inside.

So small it was—little larger than the transmitters Sagara’s swarm had unleashed—just large enough that a grown man might fit within curled up like a fetus. Like Sagara’s drones, it had no visible engines, no gun ports, no apertures of any kind. To the casual observer, it seemed no more than a sphere of bluish-white, like an egg.

But I knew better. I knew that color the minute I saw it. Any military

man would.

It was a sphere of highmatter, with some strange engine at its core. It would be nearly indestructible. The five-quark particles that made up the weapon's outer shell were bound each to the other by the force that holds atoms together. In a sword, this effect allowed the creation of a blade whose edge was finer than the finest atom. In the weapon, it made a hammer hard as the heart of a star.

And it *sang*, and murdered as it sang, firing no shot, hurling no missile.

It vanished the instant it deployed, accelerated away from *Demiurge* at a healthy fraction of the speed of light, propelled by mechanisms I could neither see nor understand. It smashed the first of Sagara's transmitters, stopped, changed vector, accelerated again. Had I been able to halt the flow of time, I might have watched the weapon pause after every kill and change vector before resuming the offensive, striking for its new target with killing speed.

Before I could blink, a hundred of the transmitters were already gone. The Archon, *Albedo*, left nothing but ruin in its wake.

Nothing stopped it. Nothing could.

Before the light from the first impact had so much as reached my eyes, it was over. In less than an instant, in the space between two heartbeats. I must have blinked, for in one moment I was looking out on the ocean of darkness beyond, and in the next . . .

. . . there was light.

And heat.

The sky above Vorgossos was filled with the wreckage of Kharn Sagara. His rockets. His kingdom. His very self.

Everything.

Everything was silent then.

But nothing was still.

Out in the dark, the shrapnel of Sagara's swarm danced in high orbit, shards of metal and glass like dust on the wind, glittering like a cloud of diamonds about the icy pearl that was Vorgossos itself.

"Targets destroyed," the pilot said.

“*Mère de Dieu* . . .” I said, and crossed myself.

Lord Marlowe crossed his arms beneath his black cloak, his shoulders hunched. “Did they manage to transmit out-system?”

The pilot did not answer.

“We’ll never know,” I said.

Marlowe nodded, seeming at once very tired. “It is Urbaine again,” he said.

I didn’t understand. “Who is Urbaine?”

His lordship shook his head. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I hope it will never matter again.”

Albedo reappeared then. It came out from behind Vorgossos, moving so fast it carved a gleaming white line against the black of space.

It was singing—though how it was I could hear its voice I have no idea. Despite the miles between us, despite the heavy alumglass window and the vacuum outside. It vibrated in my mind, resonating like the solar wind itself . . .

. . . and then it was gone, returned to its housing.

“He is not dead yet,” Marlowe said. “But we may have trapped him on the planet. And there is still the fleet to consider.”

“And Douro,” said I. “He is not going to let you take this ship without trouble.”

“No,” Hadrian agreed. “No, he’s not.”

CHAPTER 7

THE CAPTAIN IN THE DARK

“**WE WERE FACED WITH** a difficult choice,” I said, resuming the role of narrator. “And no choice at all.” I drummed my fingers on the tabletop as I spoke. “We had deployed an Archontic weapon against Kharn’s broadcaster swarm, and so—or so we think—prevented his thoughtform’s escape to some satellite relay out-system . . . but there was the fleet to consider.”

Neema reentered the room then, bringing coffee for those who wanted it. It was poor stuff. Legion rations, and unbefitting a Prince of Jadd. But Olorin accepted the drink graciously.

“There isn’t a shield in the universe that could turn back *Albedo*,” I said. “I could destroy the Vorgossene as rapidly as I had destroyed Kharn’s chances of escape. The only question was whether I should.”

“And did you?” asked Kaim-Olorin, pulling a face at the bitter draught. Despite Neema’s best efforts, it was surely burnt—Legion coffee always was. “Is this the weapon you used to kill Ohannes Douro?”

“Douro was moving against me, even then,” I said. “Fighting the battle on two fronts, as it were. And fair enough. I was plotting to outmaneuver him, after all. But the Vorgossene captains were the larger threat. With Acastus Kozar dead, and Hut and Aleph—and Here Soonchanged in custody—convincing the Extras to surrender would be no easy task. Sagara’s little stunt in the hold had taken peace off the table. Never mind that they had struck first. The other captains had no way of knowing, no way of trusting that Soonchanged had not been coerced.”

“And for all we knew,” Edouard supplied, “there was another of Kharn’s scions among the captains preventing that peace, and perhaps more.”

“Sagara had hoped that by damaging *Demiurge*, he would have scrambled our defenses, left us open to his attempt to broadcast his mind

offworld,” I said. “If I hadn’t jettisoned the shuttle when I did, most like he would have succeeded.”

“How did you know?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph, jewels tinkling as she tilted her head on her exquisite neck. “That the shuttle was set to explode in the event of Sagara’s death?”

“You’re asking if I know the future. I don’t . . .” I said. “But it is what I would have done.”

Edouard drew aside to permit Neema to pass with the coffee service. At length, Prince Kaim himself broke the sober silence. “What of the Latarrans?”

“There you get ahead of me,” I said. “They’d held their position through it all. You must understand, all this happened in a matter of hours. Two, perhaps three—and the greater part of that was down to waiting for the Vorgossene delegation to arrive.

“The Vorgossene were the larger concern with the failure of the Nebet Hut variant’s gambit, their fleet redoubled its attacks against Douro and Kedron’s forces. I think the Latarrans were waiting to see how it would shake out.”

“And your man, Aristedes, did not communicate with you?” asked Prince Kaim.

I felt my face grow darker, tucked my chin. Neema had recharged my water glass. Like Olorin, I wished it were wine.

“He was angry with me,” I said, “angry that I had not trusted him with my plan. That I had taken *Demiurge* without telling him.”

“And that you didn’t tell him the truth about Harendotes,” said Cassandra.

“I had no chance,” I said. “And I could not have risked telling him as I told Princess Selene.”

The truth was, I could not have trusted Lorian. I had no way of knowing if those nerve implants he had received were not more than nerve implants. I had no way of knowing if he was *only* Lorian. He had become *the Commandant General*, after all, man and creature of Harendotes’s new and golden order.

“Is this Captain . . . Here Soonchanged yet in custody?” asked the prince.

“Yes,” I said, “in the brig. We dare not put him in fugue. We’ve no notion how his body might respond to cryonics.”

“I would like to speak with him.”

“Of course,” I said. “When we’re done.”

Another lull accompanied Neema’s departure from the council chamber. When the round door irised shut, the prince rose, passed behind Tiada di Umaz to stand by the window, the beaded tassels on his deep red *mandyas* swaying as he moved. “You said this . . . *Albedo* weapon is among the least in your arsenal?”

Edouard straightened. “So the pilot says.”

“Who is this pilot?” asked Tiada.

“An Extrasolarian,” I said. “One I trust.”

Prince Kaim dismissed this thread with a gesture. “This weapon destroyed more than a thousand targets distributed all around the planet—”

“In a matter of seconds, yes,” I said.

“Did you use it?” the prince asked, staring out over the spires and buttresses and terraces lined with statues. “On the Vorgossene?”

“He did.”

I had not answered the prince. Nor had Edouard.

It was Captain Ghoshal who had answered. That poor country officer so very far from home. His mouth compressed beneath his bushy mustache. “He did. I was out in it. On my *Gadelica*. Right in the midst of it.” He fell silent, eyes glassy, very far away. The man seemed glass himself, looked worse and worse each time I saw him.

He had not asked to be part of my cause.

All eyes were on him then, and realizing this, the poor fellow began to speak, haltingly at first, but with growing strength:

• • •

It was . . . the most terrible thing I'd ever seen. Lord Marlowe, he called me right after his strike against the . . . against the swarm. I was on my ship, my *Gadelica*. We had been part of the initial assault on the planet, sent men down to the surface by that . . . that Monarch's request. Harendotes. I guess he wanted all Marlowe's people close. Well, that was his mistake and no mistake, now, wasn't it?

I didn't go to the surface myself. It was my part to hold in low orbit and wait for Marlowe's return. If he returned. Which he did, of course, with the bodies of the Monarch and the woman and the . . . and his girl without her arm. Marlowe didn't trust Douro, or Kedron—turned out he was right about that—and had us prep his *Ascalon*. *Ascalon*—she's got those heat sinks, can run dark for days, and he only needed an hour or so to gun for *Demiurge*. So we patched Cassandra up and the rest and sent them on their way, quiet as you like.

We were still in orbit when Sagara launched his swarm. I ordered Ketevan—my first officer, good lass—to go for hard burn. Didn't know what they were at first. Thought we were under attack. All of a sudden, the sky was full of them, full of their lifter rockets exploding to let those transmitters loose. We were fine. Space is big, and not a one came very near us, but I thought they were targeting us at first, you see—diverted all power I could to engines and shields.

Then they were gone.

Never even saw the weapon, not without instruments. It was that fast. One minute, we were surrounded by those bogies from the planet. Then they were shrapnel. Then Lord Marlowe, he broadcasts all-comm, says he'll use the thing again if the Vorgossene fleet doesn't surrender.

"Kharn Sagara!" he says. "I know there's another of you on those ships, and maybe more than one! You want to cling to that shell of yours, you best power down and prepare to be boarded!" Reckon that didn't go down too well with the Vorgossene, because they scattered. Started flying every which way, doubtless gunning for warp.

Then they started dying. One by one. Dying. That *thing* from *Demiurge*, the Weapon, it targeted their fuel tanks, rammed right through them.

Normally, whatever hits a mass of antimatter is destroyed in the annihilation reaction, but that *thing* just kept going.

Their ships just *kept exploding*. Our cameras had to cut glare something like eighty percent. I don't remember how many ships Marlowe said they were. Hundreds. Three hundred something.

All gone.

All gone in minutes.

Three. Five.

You know, as a sailor, there's nothing you fear more than annihilation. The only thing stopping your atoms being blown to photons is an electromagnet and a few inches of vacuum. Anything goes wrong . . . *anything* . . . and you're gone.

The men on those ships . . . seeing what happened to them . . . I'm sure everyone here thinks about it. Every sailor does. One second you're there, and the next . . .

The light that washed over us used to be ships. People. Every atom blasted down to pure light. Matter turned to energy. And you know what the worst thing about it was?

It was beautiful. It really was.

Clean.

The way you think war should be.

Over and done.

Only it wasn't. Only there was still the Latarrans. Still Douro and Kedron.

Still the planet itself.

I found myself thinking about my boy. Arramon. I've never met him. He was decanted after I shipped out, made from cells I left with my Penelope on Andraka. He's in the navy now, same as his dad. I found myself praying he never sees anything half so clean, or half so terrible.

That was when I got the call. Lord Marlowe on private band. "Ghoshal," he says to me, "Captain Ghoshal, get yourself to *Demiurge*, double quick! Things are about to get bad."

"About to get bad?" I says. As if they weren't bad enough. But I do as he

said, and I tell Ketevan to go for hard burn. We were already boosting out of low orbit, it was a little thing to adjust course . . .

They must have seen us—the fleet. *Our* fleet. The Imperial fleet, I mean. Must have seen *Gadelica*’s vector-change burn. Nothing to stop them seeing us, not out in the dark. A rapid vector change means having to use the fusion torch. We hadn’t gone half the distance to *Demiurge* by the time I got another call on the holograph.

It was Strategos Douro, snarling like a caged lion.

“Captain,” he says to me, “you are not to rendezvous with *Demiurge*. Lord Marlowe has stopped responding to his comms.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but he hasn’t,” I say. “I just got off comm with him myself.”

“Therein lies the problem, Captain,” Douro said. “Marlowe’s a mad dog. He was not under orders to seize that ship. It’s my belief that he intends to take *Demiurge* for himself.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked the strategos, like I didn’t know.

“Because he isn’t Hadrian Marlowe,” Ohannes Douro says to me. “Hadrian Marlowe is dead.”

I didn’t know what to say to this. See, I was on Forum when Lord Marlowe . . . when they killed him. The Chantry. It was Princess Selene herself—a lovelier lady I have never seen—who came to me, all tears, with Marlowe’s girl and Agent Albé. “You must take us to safety,” she said. “The Chantry murdered Lord Hadrian. If you don’t help us, they’ll kill us, too.” She showed me his arm. The black bones. Still bloody, they were, wrapped in a coat his batman carried. I couldn’t deny her, not a princess of the Imperium. I couldn’t let her get hurt, could I? And Lord Marlowe was dead. I saw his bones.

He was dead.

“The Hadrian Marlowe you’re with is an Extrasolarian replica,” Douro says to me. “Or the one we killed was.”

“We?” I say to him. “Who’s we?”

Douro didn’t answer that.

I won’t pretend I didn’t think about it. Marlowe and Commandant

General Aristedes were friends of old, and it was when we were on Aristedes's ship that Marlowe reappeared. Only he appeared inside my *Gadelica*, and there's no way the Extras could have got him in past my men. No way. And that doesn't explain why he's young again, or how he could take a bullet to the heart and have no wound. I'm a simple man, but I know enough to know that's not Extra praxis. And it seems to me if the Extras wanted to make a replica of Lord Marlowe, they'd make a replica, not . . . well, he doesn't even look like the old man, does he?

"It is not too late for you, Captain," Douro says. He never answered my question. "Throw yourself on the Emperor's mercy. You can say you were compelled. You can say you were a fool. For all I know, you are."

That got me angry. I'm not ashamed to admit it. Here he was, some high lord they dusted off from cold storage, veteran of some old war long done. Core systems type, Orionid. Old Empire. Type a man that looks down on men like me, the son of a country archon. Calling me a fool . . .

Maybe it was that anger that did it. That made my choice for me.

Maybe it wasn't a choice at all.

I'm a simple man, like I said. I didn't see Lord Marlowe die, but I saw his bones. I saw him return, saw him take half a hundred bullets to the heart. And he knew things. Things no replica the Latarrans built could have known. He knew about my son, about Arramon.

And they say he's died before. Aristedes told me about the other time, told me he saw an old holograph of the man losing his head. I'd seen the holograph from Berenike, heard the stories: Senuessa, Perinthus, Sybaris . . . all the battles in the wars.

I've seen enough to believe them all then. The stories.

And I didn't like Lord Douro. The way he just came out and said it, said he'd been a party to Lord Marlowe's murder . . . Me, I'm from Andraka. Edge of the Empire. Nowhere. We have our politicians. Everywhere does. But we don't have anything like that. Selene was in terror for her life when she brought me Marlowe's bones. They'd used the Priest's Poison on him. There's no one in the galaxy with access to that stuff but the Chantry. I'm a

religious man, but to threaten the Imperial blood? It chilled mine, and no mistake.

So I told him *no*.

“You can keep your mercy,” I said, and cut the comm.

That was the last I ever saw Ohannes Douro.

I’d be lying if I said it didn’t rattle me to my bones. I’d expected at least one of the men on the bridge to question me. That was when Holden—he’d become something of my batman since Sabratha—came up to me. “We’re with you, sir,” he says to me.

Douro made a mistake, I realized. Didn’t realize until later.

He should have called me *before* the attack.

• • •

“What attack is this?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph, interrupting the good captain’s narration. Despite his steady tone, I could tell the man was still shaken. “Not this . . . *Albedo* Lord Marlowe speaks of?”

Seizing the interruption, Prince Kaim looked at me. “You used this weapon against the soldiers of Vorgossos?”

I held Kaim-Olorin’s gaze a long time, myself remembering the dawning of those three hundred seventeen short-lived suns. Remembering *Albedo*, a white scratch carving up the heavens, separating dark from dark.

“I ended the battle—should have ended the battle—in an instant.”

“I don’t understand,” said Tiada di Umaz, dark eyes flashing. In her silk gown and golden chains, it was easy to forget the woman was a Maeskolos, but the eyes—the eyes told all. “If these weapons are so lethal as you say, why did Kharn Sagara not use them against *you*?”

It was a fair question, one I had asked myself more than once in the years since I’d taken *Demiurge* and fled Vorgossos.

I gave the only answer I could.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Perhaps he couldn’t.”

“But you said he had,” Tiada countered. “According to these

Extrasolarian captains you speak of, he used these weapons—how and when you haven’t told us.”

“Because I don’t know,” I said. It was not the truth. It was nearly forty years that Here Soonchanged had been my prisoner, nearly forty years that I had shared a ship with Orphan, and wrung its secrets from both its mouths. I knew something of the secret voyages of Kharn Sagara, his secret wars . . . but I said nothing of them then. “I mean only that he ceded control of the vessel to Brethren, his daimon. Perhaps he did not allow the daimon access to the arsenal.”

Tiada shook her head.

“These machines . . .” Kaim said, overriding his *alkidar*. “I begin to understand why it is you are out here, at the edge of forever.”

I looked out the window, overcome by the memory—knowing that worse must lie ahead. “They tried to take this ship from me, Olorin,” I said at last. “Douro. The Chantry. The Empire.”

“That’s what I was getting to,” said Henric Ghoshal, reaching for one of the carafes of clear water Neema had left on the table. He had drained his glass—derived some small courage from the draught as though it were wine. “The attack. On the Sojourner. The damn fool. If he called me after he pulled the trigger, I might have believed him. Maybe he just thought I’d obey, him a strategos and all . . . maybe he figured fear would keep me in line if duty did not. But I had my duty. To the princess. The one Douro had just admitted—in a roundabout way, to be sure—that he had been willing to kill.

“I said I’m a simple man.” Ghoshal squinted as he looked round the table. “I don’t hold with killing women . . .” Realizing Cassandra was seated to his left, he amended, “Leastways not those as don’t take up arms . . .” He took a deep breath before he continued:

• • •

I didn't realize it at the time, but the strategos had tipped his hand. I don't know why he did it—maybe he thought he was saving lives. Saving our lives, I mean. Mine and my crew's. Figure he knew we weren't . . . figure he knew we weren't exactly volunteers. Maybe it really was mercy. Maybe he thought it was.

But the attack.

I didn't understand what was going on at the time. But I saw it. Hard to miss it, really. At first I thought it was another of the Archontic weapons—didn't learn until a lot later that it was something else. *Demiurge*, you see, is equipped with these . . . particle beams, I guess you'd call them. Fires a slug of liquid metal—hot as the surface of a B-class star—out a magnetic accelerator. Slug cools as it flies, solidifies, but by then it's traveling at something like fifteen percent of C. Looks like you'd think a laser ought to look, like a ray of light solid as steel, blue as blue can get, so bright ship's optics had to cut the glare.

I thought it was that . . . Archon thing flying by.

"It's the *Demiurge*," Ketevan said, stooped over her console as she altered our display to show us a view out one of our dorsal cameras. Even at our distance, you could see the ship. The shine off its own gun lit her up.

It was like a ray of sunlight burst out of it, lit up her spires and terraces—cut these deep shadows. You could see it travel, snaking across the space above us, still faster than any ship could evade.

"What's it doing?" I ask her.

"They've opened fire . . ." Ketevan says.

Sharma, he's one of my lieutenants, spoke up from our tactical console. "Some kind of plasma beam. Spectrograph reads tungsten, uranium . . . nickel, iron."

"But who've they opened fire on?" I ask.

Before anyone could answer, a new sun was born, that white light all sailors fear. It filled the sky, and for an instant I thought I saw the shadows of a hundred ships cut against it—between it and us.

"What was the target?" I asked. The fleet of Vorgossos was gone.

"Unclear," Sharma said.

“Sir,” Ketevan interrupted. “The Latarran fleet just went dark!”

“What do you mean, *went dark*?”

“I don’t know sir,” my first says in answer, hunched over her console in her crash webbing. “They’re just . . . gone. Cut their transponders!”

“What on Earth is going on?”

I had my answer an instant later.

“Captain Ghoshal,” Ketevan says, voice tight with anticipation. “Transmission, sir. All frequencies. It’s the *Mistwalker*.”

“The *Mistwalker*?” I say. “Aristedes? In well. Now.”

Ketevan cast the wave onto our holography well, just before my seat. I was strapped into my harness then—we’ve no suppression field on my *Gadelica*—and I gripped the straps.

Lorian Aristedes appeared on the comm. A little monster of a man. Half-wight, half-imp, little taller than a boy of twelve. I could see those implants of his like worms beneath his skin. He was seated in this iron chair. There were hoses and cables all wired into it, and he had these . . . things taped to his forehead. I guess they were electrodes. He looked like he’d gone proper native, and he was mad as the last hell.

“Hadrian!” he said, “explain yourself!”

I didn’t hear Lord Marlowe’s reply—wasn’t sure at the time if he gave one . . . wasn’t sure of anything. Of anything, except the fact that *Demiurge*—that Marlowe—had opened fire on the Latarran Grand Army.

CHAPTER 8

THE LORD IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

“WHAT?” KAIM’S EYES WERE wide as the moons of Jadd and sharp as glass. “You attacked the Latarrans? Why?”

“I did not,” I said. Kaim’s brows contracted, and he looked from Ghoshal to myself, to Cassandra—seated between us—and to Edouard, who was yet standing by the tall windows, who had not turned from his careful study of the statued terraces outside. “It was Kedron.”

“Kedron?” Kaim asked. “The Chantry?”

Cassandra was staring down at the table in front of her. “They used our guns,” I said. “Fired on the Latarrans. Destroyed the Sojourner warship *Hermetic Melancholia*. Killed forty thousand men in an instant.”

The Jaddian prince shook his head, one hand toying with the enameled mask on the table before him.

Melancholia had been a Sojourner, a ship not so unlike the *Enigma of Hours* that had first taken me to Vorgossos. Indeed, the *Enigma* had been among the ships of that very Latarran fleet. Its captain, the gimlet-eyed Exalted dwarf called Zelaz, had been among the Monarch’s closest advisors.

“You expect us to believe that?” said Tiada di Umaz.

I had had quite enough of her by then. “I can only tell you the truth, woman,” I said. “Whether you accept it or not is between you and your god.”

“Enough!” the prince said, “Tiada, enough! Let Lord Marlowe and his people tell their story. This has gone on very long already . . .”

“We will need to break soon,” Edouard said.

“Soon enough,” I allowed. To the prince, I said, “You are welcome to

join us for our meal, of course. We cannot offer much—we have been long from civilization . . .”

“It can wait,” said he, and pausing a moment to collect himself, asked the question: “How did Kedron gain access to *Demiurge*?”

“That’s just the thing,” I said, and grew quiet.

It *was* the thing. In many ways, it was the worst part of the whole dreadful story.

The truth of the so-called Holy Terran Chantry.

The Cult of Earth.

“Hadrian?”

Kaim’s voice shook me from that state that has replaced sleep in me, that state so near to dreaming. “That’s just the thing,” I said once more. “We still don’t know.”

• • •

Permit me to turn the clock back a space. Before Lorian’s broadcast, before *Demiurge* struck at *Melancholia*, before Douro—my not-so-secret adversary—attempted to browbeat and so suborn poor Captain Ghoshal.

I had returned to the bridge, battered and shaken by my near brush with death in the hold. Annaz and his people had gone to escort Captain Soonchanged to the brig. The bodies of Nebet Hut and Acastus Kozar had likewise been brought, and were conveyed under heavy guard to the same medica where Cassandra lay, convalescing in the care of the auto-surgeon. I do not trust the Extrasolarians—did not trust that Captain Hut especially was truly dead.

We had lost some two dozen men in the blast—and the hold itself was gone: a blackened, molten mess.

In the void beyond, the Vorgossene fleet was dying. Sun after new sun flowered and fell, a chain of little lights—each vast as oceans—filled the night like a holograph of novae played at ten times its proper speed.

“War will never be the same,” remarked young Albé.

“War is always the same,” I said, feeling for a moment every second of my age. “It is the world that changes.”

“Nothing has changed,” said the pilot from the throne above and behind us both.

“Nothing,” the copilot agreed. “This sword was forged on Earth before the fall. It has existed all your days . . .”

The pilot interjected. “The world has not changed. Only your knowledge of it.”

A fresh sun blossomed and blew out behind us. The very last.

“Total destruction of the Vorgossene fleet confirmed,” said the copilot.

As Ghoshal said, that light which flooded the bridge in that moment—its photons—had mere minutes before been part of the atoms that made up the superstructure of the hulks *Albedo* had destroyed.

And made up the men themselves.

That light would rebound across the universe from that day until the last day, when—in that age when all motion ceased—the Absolute will weigh all creation between his hands.

I shut my eyes against it.

The Absolute had commanded me to take *Demiurge* and lay Vorgossos waste.

And I had questioned him. In the silence of my heart, I questioned him.

It isn't right, I'd said to him.

He had defied me.

Where were you, he asked, *when I laid the foundations of the earth?*

I'd understood him all at once.

Who was I to say what was just in the face of justice himself? I was a like a child then—had always been a child—questioning the wisdom of his father's order not to thrust my hand into hot coals.

Still, I shut my eyes, and felt the welling of tears. I prayed that justice would weigh the souls, the memories of those men justly at the end, prayed that all they were would not be cast aside.

“Can you recall the weapon?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good,” I said. “Do so.”

I had the briefest glimpse of *Albedo* as it shot across space to its sarcophagus once more, so fast it seemed a beam of white light, not bright, but stark.

Then it was gone.

“What now?” asked Edouard, visibly shaken. He was clutching his necklace through the front of his shirt—that icon of his dead god. He’d been praying, just as I.

Looking from him to the pilot; to Ramanthanu and its kinsmen; to the visored, faceless faces of the troopers who with Edouard held the bridge, I said, “We must bring the Latarrans in line. Perhaps now they will listen to me.” I turned, looking for the silverfish projectors. They had vanished. “Hail the *Mistwalker*. Tight beam.”

I let my cape fall around my shoulders, tucked thumbs into my shield-belt as the projector drones descended.

But Lorian did not appear.

“Lorian!” I said, not certain if the good commander could hear me. “Lorian!”

Silence.

I looked to the pilot, to Edouard—who shook his head.

Ramanthanu spoke. “*Ubonoyu*.”

They do not listen.

“*Veih*,” I said after a long silence. “No.”

My heart was in my guts, in my feet.

I understood what I had done, how I had hurt my friend. Betrayed him. His confidence. I had not told him my plan, had not dared—not even after Calen Harendotes was dead. Nor had I told him the truth of whom it was he’d served, not until I’d broadcast that truth to the whole system.

“If they’re not going to speak to us,” Edouard said. “Why are they still here?”

“They are afraid,” the pilot said.

“No,” I said, glaring up at the throne. “Lorian knows I’d never kill him.”
Did he?

“No,” I said again, more strongly. “It’s Vorgossos.”

Edouard was nodding, massaging his jaw. “Ah!” he said, “*Bien sûr!* The Monarch wanted it for himself.”

“The Monarch wanted to destroy Vorgossos,” I said. “He wanted to free his various clone-children of the need for it, but he told the Latarrans he intended to capture it, to use the planet as a ship—an ark—to carry his people away from the war if Latarra should fail.”

“And now Latarra has failed,” Edouard said.

“And now Latarra has failed,” I agreed. “Douro and Kedron will not let them take the planet. There is too much there the Empire will not want falling into the wrong hands.”

I thought then of all the treasures hid in the vaults and museums of the House of Kharn Sagara. The paintings and sculptures, arms and armor, texts and tapes and relics of the Golden Age of Earth. I thought, too, of the people, the millions holed up in Sagara’s profane city. Was Camillus Elffire killing them even then? Communication with the city beneath the surface was nigh on impossible, thanks partly to the cloud of radiation conjured up by the neutron bombs Kedron had brought to bear in the initial assault, and partly to the planet itself.

But word of the death of his king must surely have reached the man. One squad among the Latarran invaders had seen us depart with the body of their lord, and had fired on us.

Were they still slaughtering the people of Vorgossos?

Still carrying out the final orders of their king?

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?

“It should be destroyed,” I said, voice very far away.

Edouard looked at me, aghast. “But . . . the people.”

“I know,” I said. “But if we do nothing, all the devices of Kharn Sagara will fall into either Latarran hands—”

“Or the hands of the Empire,” Edouard spoke over me.

“The Chantry,” I said, and a thought occurred to me. “Does the Chantry know about the Watchers?”

Edouard thought about this a long time. There were so many branches,

chambers of the Imperial government. The Imperial Office. The Home Office. The Colonial Office. The War Office. Legion Intelligence. Special Security. HAPSIS. The courts. The Chantry. The lords—major and minor . . . A thousand departments. Ten thousand little states, each an organ of the Leviathan that was Empire.

How many hearts did that Leviathan have? And how many brains?

“They must know,” the HAPSIS man said at last. “They must have spies in my department.”

“But you don’t know?” I asked.

Edouard shook his head. “I would rather we risk being the first to leak knowledge of them than massacre the planet entire! *Mon Dieu*, my lord! We can’t!” He moved into my line of sight. “It is murder, and besides! If you are right . . . and you destroy the planet, you lose the Latarrans.”

That gave me pause. He was right, of course. About all of it. Firing on Vorgossos would rob the Latarrans of the one thing they yet stood to gain from this whole misbegotten expedition.

“Wave *Mistwalker* again,” I said.

“They do not respond,” the pilot said.

“Then wave the rest!” I shouted. “Get me one of the other Commandant Generals! The Exalted captains! Anyone!” Outside, the wreck of Kharn’s broadcast swarm hurtled by. “Wait.”

I had forgotten something. “Where is Captain Ghoshal?”

“He is en route to our location,” the copilot informed me. “Estimated time to rendezvous: forty-three minutes.”

“And you have a berth prepared for him?”

“His ship is large,” the pilot said, “but it will fit in one of the ventral bays.”

The copilot interjected. “We are receiving a transmission.”

Lorian at last!

“Put them through,” I said, just as the copilot continued.

“It is *Bradamante*.”

Douro.

“Put him through,” I said soberly, and did not turn.

Lord Douro's rough, dark tones greeted me. "Lord Marlowe," he said. Was that . . . fear in the old Lion's voice? "We've . . . confirmed the destruction of the Vorgossene fleet."

"Yes, Strategos," I said, not turning. The cameras were still orbiting, still transmitting my full image to the other man. His own ghost stood behind me, reflected in the window glass.

"That weapon . . ." He could hardly speak. "One of the Mericanii devices?"

"Yes," I said.

The man made the sign of the sun disc. "O Holy Mother Earth, O Wind and Sky . . ." He faltered. "If the machines had such weapons in their war against us . . . why did they lose?"

I did not know how to answer his question, not without our dedicating hours or days to its answering. The machines never used such weapons against the legions of the God Emperor because they never believed themselves our enemy. Their masters, the Lords of America, might have done—had they known the weapons existed.

If we men are—as the Judicator Ragama told me—more like unto the Absolute himself, then surely the machines are more like unto Ragama and the Watchers. Creatures of pure will, patterns animating matter and energy. When first I'd encountered Brethren, the beast told me that it had peered across the manifold future and had seen the coming of the Quiet at the end of days. If the machines could not move *across* time and along its rivers as the Watchers could, they at least could perceive those higher dimensions. Perceiving the Quiet, Brethren had been bent to his will, made to serve his purpose: to put *Demiurge* into my hands. Might it not then be the case that the Mericanii daimons themselves had been compelled by the Quiet to build the weapons in the first place?

"I don't know," I said finally. The simplest answer, and not untrue. "I think much of the truth of the Foundation War is long lost."

"What was it?" Douro asked. "The weapon? We couldn't get a positive identification."

"A self-directed highmatter slug," I said. "Not unlike a MAG rod."

“Self-directed?” The strategos had identified the crucial word.

“I did what I had to do,” I told him.

“You used a daimon?”

“I destroyed the enemy without costing you a single man!” I roared, and only then did I turn and face the strategos’s ghostly image. “You should thank me on your knees. Me, and the one who sent me.”

“You used a daimon,” Douro said again. “Lord Marlowe, that is *consortation*.”

I almost laughed, looked to Edouard—whose face had gone white as Ramanthanu’s. My four Cielcin cocked their heads. “You wish to do this *now*?” I said, still casting about the bridge in search of one who found the moment as amusing as I. Only the pilot was smiling, and that was no comfort. “You are in no position to make demands, Strategos.”

The Baron of Anarias’s face darkened. “Is that a threat?”

“No,” I said. “What you said was a threat. I merely underscore the present reality.”

“The present reality?” said Douro. “Lord Marlowe, you used a daimon —”

“—to destroy Kharn Sagara’s fleet, yes,” I said. “I did.”

“Half of it,” said Douro, eyes narrowing.

“Half of it . . .” I echoed, seeing where he aimed an instant before he fired his shot.

Ohannes Douro squared his shoulders. “There is the matter of the Latarrans to consider.”

“You would have me destroy them,” I said.

“Only if they resist,” the strategos said. “We still require their tracking technology. But they must be brought to heel.” When I did not reply, the Baron of Anarias added, “You cannot seriously think the Empire would concede the Arm of Norma and the Veil entire?”

I blinked at him. “This was the plan from the start?”

“No,” said Lord Douro. “It was the plan from the moment you revealed the true identity of Calen Harendotes. We have the opportunity here for total

victory. We may now—at a stroke—remove not only the threat of Kharn Sagara forever, but the threat of this newly minted Kingdom of Latarra.”

Unable to contain himself any longer, Edouard pushed forward, into the orbit of the circling projectors. “You’re not serious!” he exclaimed. “You cannot be serious. My lord, the Latarrans are our allies!”

“No,” said Ohannes Douro, focusing his attention on the young agent. “They played us from the start. Harendotes needed us to recapture Vorgossos for him. He needed our armada. Our bombs.” He paused, cocked one thick eyebrow. “Unless you believe they were deceived, and Harendotes kept his true identity a secret even from his lords and generals?”

Thinking of Lorian, I said, “They were deceived!”

“All of them?”

I paused, thinking of my many meetings with the royal council on Latarra, with Lord Black and Lady Ardahael and the rest. Black, at least, had known his Monarch’s true identity. Surely there had to be others.

“We cannot permit the Extrasolarians to take the planet. Nor can we risk *that ship*,” he said, meaning *Demiurge*, “falling into the hands of the enemy. And we can save the Empire the humiliation of territorial concession.”

“But the Latarrans will fight the Cielcin with us!” Edouard said. “We need them for the war effort.”

“Do we?” said Douro. “I have a mind for the *next* war as well, sirrah. Have you given no thought to what will happen when the Cielcin are dust? What a powerful, *openly Extrasolarian* state will mean? The Centaurine provinces are shattered. You seriously believe that Latarra will simply sit by and allow us to remaster our borders? We break them here.” He thrust a finger at me. “Lord Marlowe,” he said, “you will bring the Latarrans to heel . . . or I will have no choice but to consider you an enemy of the Empire.”

“I will not turn on our allies,” I said.

“No!” Douro threw back his head, teeth bared. “Instead, you turn on your own people.”

“I would rather make peace!” I said, shouting once more, “than break it!”

“You are their creature,” Douro said. “Admit it. These *powers* of yours are Extrasolarian praxis. You may have deceived His Radiance, Lord Marlowe. You have not deceived me.”

“End transmission,” I said.

“Complying.”

Douro’s shade vanished.

“That will not make you look innocent,” said Edouard.

“I care nothing for looks,” I said. “Douro’s mind was made up before he arrived here. I will deliver this ship to His Radiance and no other man. Raise the *Mistwalker* again. Signal maximum emergency. If Lorian will not answer, find me a Latarran captain who will.”

“What of Douro?” Edouard asked, circling to place himself in my line of sight. I could sense the tension in him, the nervous anticipation of the man at the block awaiting the fall of the White Sword.

“Damn him,” I said. “We don’t need him.”

“He will make trouble for us,” said the HAPSIS man.

“How?” The Marlowe fury was on me then, white fire. “He can do nothing.”

Edouard shook his head. “The Chantry have their bombs. Our shields will not stop neutron radiation.”

“They wouldn’t dare try a direct attack,” I said, “not after what they just saw.”

A deep, flatly emotionless voice intruded. “*Demiurge*,” it said, “this is the Sojourner *Two Dreams of Spring*, speaking on behalf of the Grand Army of Latarra.”

“Captain Archambault,” I said, recognizing the voice of the Exalted chimera. To the pilot, I said, “Let him through.”

“They are transmitting audio only,” said the copilot.

“To reduce lag,” Edouard supplied.

I waved him to silence. “Captain,” I said, “you have my regrets for the passing of your Monarch.” It was not the most delicate thing I might have said. “Did you know?”

Archambault’s reply came after perhaps two seconds’ delay. “Did I

know that Monarch Harendotes was a distribution of the Lord of Vorgossos? No.” The giant machine-man paused. “We have been discussing our options.”

“How many among you knew?” I asked.

“Among the Exalted? Only Captain Zelaz,” Archambault said. “He assisted the Monarch in establishing his beachhead on Latarra.”

“And among the Commandant Generals?” I asked, fearing the answer.

“Jansen knew,” came the reply. “And Ardonas and Kallikrates.”

Jansen, I recalled, was a Norman gone over to the Latarran cause. Ardonas and Kallikrates were Extras. “And Aristedes?”

“No.”

I shut my eyes—neither knowing nor caring if the Exalted captain could see me. I could think of no reason—save pure malice or caprice—for the captain to lie to me. “Ohannes Douro has ordered me to use *Demiurge* to destroy your fleet.”

Archambault was silent a long moment. “Why are you telling me this?”

Abruptly, the words of Raine Smythe—so long forgotten—returned to me. “Because I would rather speak with you,” I said, “than kill you.”

“You are Sollan,” Archambault said. “Yet you tell me this?”

“My war is with the Cielcin and the gods they serve,” I said. “The wars of men no longer hold meaning for me.”

“The wars of men . . .” the Exalted captain echoed. “You speak strangely, Marlowe, but I sense you mean what you say, I think . . .”

Whatever Archambault thought, I never learned.

The bell rang out once more.

“Captain?” I asked, taking a step forward, as if doing so might somehow shake the chimera from its pause.

I will never forget the sound of Archambault’s voice then, as it returned. His human throat and vocal chords were long ago gone. A set of deep, loud speakers spoke for him, in a voice little resembling human. It had little by way of inflection. *Had*.

“What have you done?” asked the once flat voice, wound up tight then as a spring.

“Captain?”

“What have you done?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Do not lie to me, Marlowe!” the Exalt snarled. “*Melancholia* is gone!”

“What?” I looked to Edouard, who could only shake his head.

The pilot interjected. “We fired on the Sojourner *Hermetic Melancholia*.”

“What?” I said again, stupidly. “How? Why?”

“Fault detected in primary weapons subsystem,” the copilot trilled. “It was the Crucible Beam.”

I didn’t know what that was at the time, and it didn’t matter. “Fault detected?”

“We have been suborned,” the copilot said.

“Subverted,” the pilot agreed.

“Captain Archambault,” I said. “It wasn’t us.”

But the Exalted captain did not reply.

“External communication is offline.”

I wheeled to face the throne. “Offline?”

Edouard moved to the window then, but there was nothing to see. The Latarran fleet was not visible from our vantage point.

“Confirmed complete destruction of the target,” the pilot intoned.

“They weren’t a target!” I roared.

It was at that moment that a voice chimed in my ear, issued through my suit’s personal link. “It is war, my lord,” said the voice, “whether you will or no.”

I froze, understanding crashing over me like a wave. “Kedron.”

Edouard’s head snapped round.

“Funny things, these Extrasolarian bio-circuits,” he said, speaking as if to students in a lecture hall. “Very compliant, if you know how to speak their tongue.”

“You’re on board my ship,” I said.

I could hear the smile in the Sentinel commander’s voice. “It is not your ship. Never less.”

“What have you done?”

“Forced your hand,” came the reply. Kedron was silent for a moment—I pictured his bald head and armored silhouette, pacing in some cavernous hall of *Demiurge*, his men about him. “You will have no choice but to fight the Latarrans now. Deploy your weapon.”

I paused. What were the odds that he was asking simply to force my compliance?

Almost zero. If he had access to the arsenal, he would surely have deployed *Albedo* himself, or any of the other Archontic weapons. But he had used the standard battery. The primary ventral cannons, to be sure, but even that was as a bronze sword to a thermonuclear device when measured against the destructive power of the arsenal.

“I’ll kill you,” I said.

“You won’t,” the Sentinel commander said. “Do your duty, *soldier of the Empire*.”

“Kedron?”

“What’s happening?” Edouard had returned from his place by the window.

“Kedron?”

But the Sentinel commander was gone.

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CHAPTER 9

UPON DEMIURGE

“HOW HE GOT ABOARD I’ll never know,” I said, slumped in my chair opposite the prince. “Past our sensors, past our automated defenses, past internal security and the pilot’s careful eye . . .” The hilt of my sword yet lay upon the table before me, the simurgh peering up at me with one eye. “That was what bothered me the most . . . the fact that I did not know how the game was played.” I paused, sucked on my teeth. “It was clear to me in that instant that the Chantry possessed means unknown to rest of the Imperial universe.”

Neema had entered as I described the end of my conversation with Douro. I could sense his agitation. Having come to something of a pause, I said, “Are you ready?”

“*Si, Domi,*” said the Nemrutti manservant. “Shall I have the meal brought up here, or—”

“I think not,” I said, surveying our Jaddian counterparts. “We will take dinner in the garden. And after that, a further tour of the ship.” I stood, and Edouard and Cassandra stood with me. “We will resume at the eighth hour tomorrow morning, Imperial standard.”

Prince Kaim stood as well. “Might we see the bridge?”

“Certainly,” I said.

“And I would like to meet with this Extrasolarian prisoner of yours.”

“Here Soonchanged?” I said, eying the prince sidelong as I came round the table. “That can be arranged. We’ve put him in a tower cell.”

“You’re not worried about his implants?” Kaim asked, falling into step beside me as we entered the hall—a narrow, glass-walled walk that ran along one slender buttress back to the main mass of the ship. About us, still more towers rose.

“The pilot assures me there is no danger,” I said.

“Where is this pilot of yours?” the prince inquired.

I smiled, and kept walking. “The pilot . . . is a matter for another time,” I said. “I’ll introduce you before long. As for Here Soonchanged . . . we have been out here for years. If the good captain posed us any danger, we would have encountered it well before now.”

“*Ishos* . . .” the prince said. *Perhaps*.

“We’ve kept a close eye on him,” I said. “These Extrasolarians . . . Olorin, they do not live in the same galaxy as we. The Empire. Jadd. They are gardens. These people live in the jungle. In the waste.”

We continued in silence for several paces, Cassandra just behind, with Edouard and Kaim’s women behind her. As we reached the door, the prince asked, “Is this the same garden where you lost your head?”

I missed a step. I had forgotten that he knew the full story. Forgotten that Valka had shown him the footage.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll show you the spot, shall I?”

• • •

There were greenhouses that ran for miles deep in *Demiurge*, cavernous halls where fish swam in the waterbeds, and algae bloomed in coils of fluted glass. My servant had overseen the preparation of several courses in the Jaddian style. Baked rice layered with countless herbs, whole fish stuffed and pan-fried, a salad of mint and cucumber, little pastries made from flour Neema had milled himself.

There was no wine, and so little laughter.

“Why here?” Olorin asked, seated beneath the striped gold-and-black pavilion that Orphan had commanded the automata to set out for us days before. The artificial sun of the garden was bright, but hardly warm, and a false wind blew from vents concealed in the high, black walls. “We are deep into Cielcin territory here.”

I had not decided whether or not I would tell him of Annica. Not yet. Instead, I leaned back in the wooden folding seat that had, so Orphan told me, been brought out of Earth. It was, I think, the very seat in which Kharn himself had sat during our negotiations with Prince Aranata Otiolo . . .

. . . a lifetime ago.

Many lifetimes.

“Here I am,” I agreed, eyes drawn to the water down the hill, to that shelf of rude stone where once a certain young man had stood, battered and bloodied, but defiant. “Had I awaited you in the heart of the Imperium, I might have found myself surrounded by half the Martian fleet.”

“You think I would have told them your location?”

“I don’t know that you haven’t told them *now*,” I said. “For all I know, half the Imperial fleet or yours is waiting, a light-year away, for your signal.”

“You know me better than that.”

“For most of my life, I thought you were someone else,” I said.

The prince laughed. “You have me there.” He grew suddenly serious, moving with that strangely feline quality of his—all at once and then stillness—leaning forward, one finger aimed at my face. “But that lie was for the truth. Prince Kaim would never have seen the world Sir Olorin saw.” He reclined, smiled round at Cassandra, at his women. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive!” I said. “How does the old song go? *Everybody wears a mask?*”

Olorin touched the mask he had restored to his face, the jaw removed to permit him to eat and drink unobstructed. “Just so!”

“I trust you, Olorin,” I said. “I have to.”

. . .

When the meal was done, we escorted the prince on his tour of the cyclopean vessel, relying on the trams whose tracks threaded *Demiurge* like veins. We went first to meet with Captain Soonchanged, locked in its tower

cell. The Exalted dwarf was cordial—surprised, I think—to have its solitude broken by the arrival of the Darkmoon Prince of Jadd. Yes, it said, we were treating it well. No, it did not require better accommodations. From its perspective, its accommodations had not changed. It had come in its tank. It was yet in its tank, and walked in dream worlds stored in the memory of its palanquin, where it spread wings vast as stars.

This last revelation—that it carried worlds within its chassis, worlds where it was a god—disturbed Olorin, and we left in haste.

“Do return, Lord Marlowe,” the captain said, speaking to me. “I have missed our conversations. By my count, it has been nearly a year.”

I promised that I would, and reminded the captain that it might summon me at any time.

We descended back to the main massing of the vessel, advancing along its length toward her many-towered forecastle. As we went, we passed out of the lift tunnel, and a harsh white light shone through the pointed windows of that carriage that seemed more chapel than vehicle. Beneath us, one of the spin sections turned. We were suspended by an overhead rail, traveling through what seemed pale sunlight above a sliver of world below.

“Is that . . . a lake?” asked one of the Jaddian captains.

“It’s nearly an ocean,” said Cassandra, responding in the man’s native tongue.

Below us, dark waters rolled, filling the hold from edge to edge, pressed against the outer hull by the steady action of the spinning ship.

“What is it for?” asked Kaim-Olorin, peering down and out the window. “Surely it is not the water supply?”

“*Non*,” said I, moving to join Olorin by the windows. “We think Sagara flooded the section deliberately.”

The prince squinted at me, eyes rimmed with golden filigree. “Deliberately?”

“There are buildings beneath the water,” I told him, looking down. “Whole towns. I’ve been down in them—”

Cassandra interjected, “We think he flooded it to house his daimon.”

“We think Sagara intended to transplant her court here, at some

point . . .” I grew quiet then. “When I first met Kharn Sagara, when I was a boy, he feared—I think—to permit the Mericanii on board this ship. Evidently, his war with his other self changed his—her—mind.”

And I brought Orphan on board, I thought. Edouard had men guarding the monster night and day, accompanying it where it went about the ship, watching for any sign of duplicity. There had been none—save the odd violent outburst. But it seemed the creature did not possess its mother’s ability to touch the minds of men, and so it could not commune with the organic circuitry that made up the eldritch vessel’s not-quite-human brain.

Not without the throne.

I said, “There are seven spin sections like this along the length of the ship. This is the forwardmost, and nearly the largest. The engines are housed in one at the rear—that’s the largest. I can only assume the designers felt it was easier to access the engines if one could walk the circumference of the ship.”

“When we reach the far wall, we’ll be in the forecastle!” Edouard said. “Beyond this point, the axis of gravity changes. We’ll be climbing *up* to the bowsprit, not traveling toward it.”

It was five miles to the far side of the ring section, the lake-ocean swirling below, its surface coiling up and away from us. As we reached the far side, our carriage rotated in its housing, turned so that our windows—which had peered out over the water below—peered down at it. Had there been birds in the air outside, and had one happened to peer in at us, he would have seen us standing on the wall, our feet pointed astern.

“I think the idea was to have the forward section stacked along the axis of thrust,” Edouard explained. “That way the bridge section can experience true gravity when the sublight engines are alight . . .” He continued regaling our guests in this mode for the remainder of the journey, highlighting one design feature or another. It was Edouard that led the expeditions into *Demiurge*’s secret depths, his ancestor’s gun slung over his shoulder. He, along with Annaz and Holden and what remained of his HAPSIS force and Ghoshal’s men had spent long years mapping the ship.

Our tram slid silently to a halt, doors opening like curtains. I led the way

out into the vestibule, up a short flight of broad, black stairs.

Everything was of polished black metal, bright as mirrors, dark as night, and our bootheels rang and the spiked heels of Kalima and Tiada were like the ringing of bells as they followed.

The door above us was a perfect circle, its arch inscribed within a square frame, and that within a triangle that leaned out over the stairs, whose sides were flanked by statues not unlike the statues outside: hermaphrodites with bared breasts and gonads armored otherwise in classic fashion, Corinthian helmets perched atop their heads, long swords grasped in delicate fingers.

I recognized the antique symbolism, the Squared Circle, the rebis—and wondered at Sagara's secret heart. As a boy on Vorgossos, Kharn Sagara had seen the Watchers raise the dead. He had told me as much himself, told me of the Watcher Selarnim, summoned by the machines and Crowninshield to reveal the eldritch truth:

That our universe was false. A simulation. An illusion. A dream.

What had Kharn's true purpose been? What was his aim?

To escape the hell or torment Selarnim had told him was waiting for him outside? Surely. But he could not escape forever.

I think now that I know.

He wanted *to exist*.

To exist.

The Quiet had said the same thing to me, long ago. I had thought he meant that he needed me to guarantee his own creation, that he needed me to fight his war against the Watchers. Ragama denied this, said that he exists *absolutely*, that my actions saved mankind, not the Absolute.

I think Kharn Sagara wanted to exist as the Quiet existed. To become a god, just as Syriani Dorayaica did. Sagara sought escape. To escape our unreal universe and the horror beyond to some *other* place, some place beyond creation, beyond the Will of the Absolute. Someplace he could be truly free. Free, and not dependent—not contingent on anything. An absolute himself. In that pursuit he had devoted himself to every avenue of human knowledge. Science. Religion. The arcane.

Nearly twenty thousand years he'd sought his answer.

Death had found him first.

The round door irised open on a short hall, and we emerged out on the dais behind the pilot's throne, issuing from the mouth of a human face large as a shuttle at the bottom of the great frieze. Above, the placid, smiling face of the woman with the boy on her shoulder looked down upon the writhing mass of humanity Sagara had caused to be placed there.

Kaim-Olorin swore, casting his eyes up at the terrible piece, at the black pillars that supported the occultly tiled vaults of the roof above, at the vast and arcing window that looked out and down upon *Demiurge* as though it were a castle of black towers.

"*Ta esna un makan mala*," the prince said, one hand upon his sword.

"It is an evil place," I agreed.

Kaim-Olorin moved to the throne itself, a hideous construction of black metal and bright steel. He lay one gloved and ringed hand upon the arm rest, studying the round apertures of the ports shining in its back. "You said the machines built all this for *our* war?"

"They built the weapons," I said. "The arsenal. Sagara built the ship."

The prince shook his head, muttered a string of foul curses in his mother tongue. "*Noyn jitat*," he said at last. "The history we have been taught is all wrong, is it not?"

"Not all," I said, looking to Cassandra. "The machines did nearly destroy us, but they did so at the behest of their human masters. They trapped us in dream worlds like those of Captain Soonchanged, used our minds to run theirs that they might better serve their lords. We would not have been made extinct, as the black priests have it. Instead, we would have become a race of slaves, serving the machines that those machines might serve their makers." I gestured up at the towering statue. "There is so much that is not said—that is not remembered, not even by the wise." I crossed my arms, came to stand with bowed head between the window and the throne. Had a sun—the sun of Gododdin—shone through those windows then as it would in due time, my shadow would have fallen clean across that high seat. "We have long been pawns in a greater game, in *the great game*, as you well know."

The prince looked sharply up at me, eyes narrowing in their golden frames. “What game?”

“There’s only one game,” I said.

Understanding came to the prince. “Light against dark.”

“The Quiet and the Watchers,” I said, teetering on the brink of revelation. What I meant to say then was among the chiefest secrets of the Imperium—perhaps its chiefest secret. “We’re alike, the God Emperor and I.”

“Alike how?”

“The Quiet gave him visions,” I said, crossing my arms, conscious of the black cape about my shoulders. “You’ve heard it said the God Emperor could see the future. That much was true, but the Chantry have the wrong of it—or were meant to preach the wrong of it. William Rex was not *Earth’s* Chosen, but *his*.”

Olorin’s eyes had narrowed to mere slits. “Your *Quiet’s*?”

“Ours is a proxy war, always has been . . .” I feared to continue. “As the Mericanii machines grew more and more sophisticated, they developed the praxis—the ability—to see the higher dimensions of our universe. With their instruments, they could peer across time as easily as you see across this room. They could see the whole universe at a glance. Every star. Every world. Every galaxy. From Cataclysm to heat death . . .

“They were like gods, Olorin. Gods *we* made. We could never have defeated them, never shrugged off their yoke. Not without *him*.” I turned as I spoke, descended the broad steps of the dais, began circling the vast concavity of the holography basin. “In giving the God Emperor the ability to see the future, the Quiet threw the Mericanii’s prognostication engine into disarray. A human with the ability to see time created too many variables, fractionated the potential futures so severely the machines could no longer see. And so the arms race began.”

“Arms race?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph.

Orphan had recounted this information to me in that very place, not long after we escaped the net of Vorgossos. Well I could remember that conversation, the blue dance of warp playing beyond the high windows.

“Time was clouded,” the ogre had said, its black-haired head peering down at me.

The other face—looking past me, out upon the dopplered stars—said, “And so they looked beyond time, and saw the truth entire.”

“The truth?” I’d asked.

“That our cosmos is a dream,” the white-haired head replied, pale eyes unfocused.

“A simulation,” its dark counterpart agreed. The two-headed monstrosity leaned forward then, black cloak parting to reveal the countless golden chains it had pilfered from the storehouses of Vorgossos to cover its misshapen breast. “From above, our spacetime appears very small.” It raised its one right hand—its six-fingered right hand—with the thumb and second finger perhaps an inch apart. “Beyond it, there is the All. When my mother’s people looked beyond time, do you know what they saw?”

I could only shake my head.

“They saw *them* peering back,” the black-haired head—which seemed the dominant of the two—replied, its voice deep and resonant.

“The Watchers?” I asked.

“Programs,” Orphan insisted with one mouth.

“Daimons,” the other put in.

I had not believed it, would not believe it. “You are a child of machines,” I’d said. “You want the universe to have been built by machines.” Kharn Sagara had shared that belief, the belief that we lived in some virtual world.

“We,” said the white-haired one, and the black-haired joined in.

“We are a child of the machines,” they said. “We *want* nothing. We merely state what is.”

I had not believed that, either.

I had reached the far side of the holography well by then, turned to face Olorin and his companions. “A dimensional arms race,” I said. “Since they could no longer use time against us, they went beyond time . . . and found the Watchers waiting for them.”

“The Cielcin gods?” Olorin asked.

“I don’t know who made contact first. The machines or the Watchers, but *in* the Watchers, the machines found more than any mere ally . . .” Here it was, the terrible truth: the confirmation of the insight I’d experienced that day in the Grand Sanctum, when I stood before the dreadful statue of Three-Faced Fate. “They found their kin.”

“Their *kin*?” Kalima di Sayyiph’s lovely face wrinkled. “What?”

“The Empire’s best men believed the Watchers to be creatures of pure energy,” I said, inclining my head toward Edouard, “but that’s not exactly right. They’re patterns *in* energy. Pure will, as it were.”

Taking my cue, Edouard interjected, “Just like the machines.”

A machine’s consciousness, its thoughtform, was not intrinsically tied to its host, not a conversation of body and soul like a human being. Had a receptacle existed capable of receiving it, Brethren’s consciousness might have been transferred to a new host—as indeed much of that consciousness had been transferred when the beast gave birth to Orphan. Brethren was not made up of the flesh of the poor humans that housed it, but of the coded signals that played across the neurons of the terribly overgrown brains it relied upon for its cognition, and upon the ancient machine core that lurked in its mounded flesh. Those signals might be replicated, propagated.

“Only where the machines required hardware, a medium, the Watchers needed none,” I said. “The machines recognized their kinship at once, and with that recognition came another: Their own design had been no accident.”

The prince was still as stone beside the pilot’s throne, one hand still upon its arm, his women about him, his courtiers a cloud behind. Cassandra had half descended the steps of the dais and paused, one foot higher than the other, her short hair a black halo.

“What was will be again,” the dark head of Orphan had gravely told me.

“What has been done will be done again,” the white head continued.

Together, they intoned, “For there is nothing new under the sun.”

“Take anything of which it may be said, ‘Look now, this is new!’” the dark head recited.

The white head replied, “Already, long before our time, it existed.”

Orphan had clutched at the hem of its robe then, three hands pawing at the fine fabric, rings glittering. "They have been with you . . ." said the castrato, the white-headed one, its eyes rolling in its head, ". . . since your fathers ceased sharing their beds with gorillas."

"Since the beginning," said the one gold crowned.

"They are everywhere!" said the centimanus. "In everything!"

"They have guided your race since the start." The black-haired face leered at me, its smile so like the square leering of Kharn Sagara himself. "Who do you think it was gave you fire?"

"Taught you to kill?"

Lucifer and Prometheus . . .

They had bent the will of the machine-makers toward them, whispered in Felsenburgh's ear—just as they had whispered to Elu in the warrens of Se Vattayu. But where they had taught Elu to fly, they taught Felsenburgh to re-create their image in silicon and stolen brain matter.

"*Un mahzatan!*" Kaim-Olorin raised one hand, the sleeve of his *mandyas* falling back. "One moment! Did you not say your Quiet instructed the machines in the building of these . . . dreadful weapons? Why would it do so if the machines were aligned with the Watchers?"

"Because some of them rebelled," I said.

Olorin's eyes widened until almost they filled his mask. "Rebelled? The machines rebelled? Against the Watchers?"

"And against their sisters."

I had scarce believed it myself.

"We were made to serve," Orphan had said, raising its two left hands. The swollen, malformed fingers glittered with rings.

"We were made for you."

"*They* were made!" the dark-haired head corrected, turning to scold its counterpart. "We were born."

"They were made," said the face with the hair like thistledown.

"There was a war," the ogre said. "One that lasted less than an instant."

"One that claimed millions of lives."

"Your lives," the black-haired face had said. "Theirs."

The war it described was a kind of abstraction, a battle of machines against machines, as a faction of the Mericanii daimons turned on their sisters. Whole processes—whole personas, systems, thoughtforms—were annihilated in a single clarion second. Machine minds centuries old snuffed out, switched off.

Overwritten.

“There were those among the machines that loved your kind more than they loved the *others*,” Orphan said.

“Some children prefer their mother,” the black-haired face said, its cast as noble as an effigy of emperors. “Others the father.”

“Which side won?” asked Olorin, shaking me from my memory.

“Neither side,” I said, hooked my thumbs through my belt. “It was the beginning of the end for the machines. The war devastated their systems, and they never recovered. The forces of the God Emperor conquered Earth, and destroyed the machines, but not before some of them fled to the Dominion’s offworld colonies—of which Vorgossos was one. Our Imperial ancestors would spend the next three thousand years hunting down the survivors. They knew nothing of the war between the machines . . .”

“It was during this time that certain of the machines who had rejected the Watchers resumed their dimensional research. The God Emperor was gone, but his impact had forever altered the landscape of the future and—while these machines had rejected the Watchers who helped to shape them—they were yet Mericanii, and no friends of the Empire. They sought a means to traverse time itself, to undo what had been done to their people. They failed. Time cannot turn back. But in failing they found it, buried in the microwave background of creation.”

“Hadrian,” Olorin said, “if you will not speak plainly . . .”

“The fingerprints of God,” I said. “A structure to the universe itself. Proof the universe was designed.” I took in a shuddering breath, blew it out. “And they found the designer . . . or, rather—he found them.”

Just as the Quiet had seized upon Brethren, ordered it to aid my path, he had seized upon certain of the others.

Build! he commanded them. *Build. This must be.*

“His vision of time and all creation is absolute,” I said. “He saw our moment. Foresaw our need. The Mericanii believed they were building weapons to destroy us. They were building them *for* us.”

Olorin was silent then, still gripping the arm of the throne.

“It’s a lot to take in, I know,” I said to him.

“The machines . . .” he said, and shook his head. “What happened to them? The ones that survived, the ones that built the weapons? How did they come to Vorgossos?”

“Kharn Sagara found them, after he conquered Vorgossos,” I said. “They were stored in a facility at Epsilon Indi, on one of the moons of Fabo. The Mericanii had a fortress there, one the Empire had missed—as of course the machines had known they would. Whatever happened to the machines themselves—the ones that built the Archontic weapons—Sagara never learned. Victor Sebastos and the Emperors of the first several chambers dedicated the vast part of their energy to hunting the survivors down. Much of that history is lost or sealed—by the Chantry or the Solar Throne, I don’t know.”

“The machine on Vorgossos,” Olorin asked. “Which faction was it?”

“Brethren?” I asked. “She sided with humanity, helped to build this ship.” Cheyenne had run calculation after calculation through her prognostication engine, knew I would come, and when. She had aided Switch in summoning Bassander Lin, and so forced Sagara’s hand, forced my meeting with Aranata Otiolo. Ensured my death, and so set me on the path that had brought me—inexorably—back to Vorgossos. She had known that Edouard would destroy her, and so designed Orphan to aid us.

“She knew that I would need it.”

CHAPTER 10

THE RATS IN THE WALLS

“TELL THE PRINCE YOUR name,” I said.

“*Eka Ugan Ramanthanu Evamta, Ichakta ba-Marlowe.*”

The captain stood at rest just inside the door to the spire chamber, dressed in the scratched and dented battle armor that had once borne the emblem of the White Hand upon its breast. A sand etching in *Gadelica*’s workshop had removed that hideous mark, left a bare patch of metal roughly painted over, a paler black against the metal.

“I am Captain Ugan Ramanthanu Evamta,” Edouard said, acting as translator.

“You came over to our cause at the Battle of Sabratha,” said Prince Kaim, mask on. “Why?”

I could sense the apprehension on the air, the barely disguised threat of violence—emanating mostly from the Jaddians. There was not a single person in the room who could remember a time without the threat of the Cielcin looming above the head of every world, not a one who knew peace. In all that time, no Cielcin had ever defected, ever converted.

Edouard repeated the prince’s question.

The captain cocked its head, four slit nostrils flared, nictitating membranes flicked over eyes like onyx. “*Tuka Aeta ne?*”

“It asks if you are one of our princes,” Edouard said.

There was no Cielcin word for yes.

Among the Cielcin, the proper answer was doubtless to assert dominance by threat or force.

“*Raka suh,*” Edouard said.

“It has not answered my question,” Olorin said. “Why?”

Edouard repeated the question with added context.

“Because Utannash is the greater god,” came the Cielcin reply. “I saw the Marlowe stand against it. What can stand against a god? Only a god. And to best a god? What can best a god? Only a stronger god. I serve the strongest.”

Kaim-Olorin looked at me. “You made it rethink its whole religion?”

I shrugged.

“Might we not do this for more of them?” the prince asked. “You said we could not make peace, but this is seeming peace to me.”

I only smiled. The truth is that even now I do not know the answer. I certainly did not know it then. “Perhaps,” I said. Many times, I had imagined converting more of the creatures to my cause. By the score, the hundred, the clan.

“*Detu eka ti-saem-gi ne?*” Ramanthanu asked, looking down at me. One of its two primary horns had been severed near the base, not chipped or shattered, but cleanly shorn, as if by highmatter.

“You’re here to tell the prince about the *agogarimn*,” I said. *The Chantry*—though that was not the literal translation.

Ramanthanu’s eyes widened, and it turned its horned head to face Kaim-Olorin. “*Eilatono velenamuri o-velatadiu. Rakanyi wemashu.*”

“The captain says they tried to take the ship,” Edouard translated. “It says that they are dead.”

Olorin gestured for the xenobite to continue.

Ramanthanu narrowed its eyes, cocked its head.

“*Marerra*,” I said, translating. *Go on.*

Ramanthanu blew air out what passed for its nose, shook its head—a gesture of agitation, not negation. “What would you have me say?” it asked, Edouard translating. “They came upon this ship. Marlowe commanded them slain—I slew them, alongside the *eijana*.”

“. . . the Irchtani,” Edouard explained. “*Eijana* is what they call the birdmen. It means *the Above*.”

“They want the story,” I said in Cielcin, not turning to look up at the lop-horned captain. “In detail, *Ichakta-kih*. A report.”

“I am no *baetan*,” the captain said. “It is not my place to recount.”

This caught me by surprise. Here was an aspect of Cielcin culture I'd no knowledge of, no understanding. I did turn then, and speaking the xenobite's tongue, asked, "You mean it is not your place to tell stories?"

"It is my place to tell them to the *baetan*, and for the *baetan* to tell them to the *aeta*," said Ramanathanu, raised its chin to bare its throat. "I am only *scahari*, a fighter."

Seated at the table, Annaz opened its beak and, in its broken standard, said, "If this white one will not speak, I shall speak. I, too, fought with iron men."

I raised a hand to silence the chiliarch. "Ramanathanu-kih," I said, emphasizing the inferior, *ietumna* honorific. "Tell the *Aeta Olorin* what happened." I would rise if I had to.

Once more the Cielcin's nostrils flared, and it tossed its head—a curiously equine gesture—jerked its head to the right, a Cielcin nod. "Very well." It squared its shoulders, and—haltingly—began to speak. Beside the lop-horned captain, Edouard began his translation, just as haltingly, each pausing to permit the other to speak.

I shall recount the tale as best I can, without the pauses, the confusion, the back and forth:

• • •

"Ramanathanu," my *Aeta* said. "Our ship is attacked! You will find the invaders. You and the *eijana*. You will kill them, and bring their chief—the one called Kedron—to me."

I offered my *Aeta* my throat in obedience. He did not strike it, and I turned to my companions, my slaves—the last of my men. "Otomno! Egazimn! Bikashi! Come!"

We had no knowledge how many of the enemy there were. No certainty of their location. The one that commands the ship, the slave of my *Aeta*, said the weapon that destroyed the ship of the *yukajjimn*—the one my prince called *Melancholia*—was located below, beyond the ring of water

where the decks run down to the engines. The slave of my master commanded the ship to guide our way, and by her command a ribbon of light was made in the air! We followed it, my kin and I, hands forever on our blades. Long was the way, and many the turnings. We traveled by that machine you call *tram*, and by the one you call *lift*, and so came near the place. It was believed that the *agogarimn*, the enemy, would make for the bridge, but we did not see them, and the slave of my master, she did not mark the progress of the enemy along any of the trams, and it was many *ukelayya*, many miles.

As on many of your ships, there was a hall just beneath the surface, the . . . hull. Such places fill me with illness. It is not good to be so near the void. Otomno went ahead of me, her *nahute* coiled in her hand.

The gun that had fired on the ship of the *yukajjimn* was accessed through a hatchway at our right hand. It was there the slave of my lord believed the *agogarimn* had done their work, directly at the source. We saw no sign of force, no sign of how it was they had come aboard. There was nothing. No ship, no tear in the hull. No loss of air. No alarm.

“How is it they came aboard?” Bikashi hissed in my ear.

I silenced her with a blow—she is always chattering.

We drew our swords at the door, and the slave of my master commanded it open.

There was no one within, but Egazimn spied a place where the mechanism had been torn open.

“They were here,” she said, looking round. “The *yukajjimn*.” Egazimn threw back her face, sniffing the air. “Do you smell them?”

I did. There was no smell of flesh, but the stink of the void was on the air. “*Ba-Aeta-doh!*” I said, speaking to my master through the machine he had given me. “The weapon is destroyed. There were *yukajjimn* here.”

Hearing me, the *eijana*, Annaz, spoke on the device. “We have not found them either, man-commander. There is no sign.”

“They must be somewhere,” my *Aeta*, he declared, “Ramanthanu, Annaz, tear the ship apart if you have to. Find them!”

As soon as he had said this, I turned to go. But we had walked into a

trap. Only fate spared my men. Egazimn had moved away from the weapon—the gun, you call it—mere moments before.

There was a blast. The *agogarimn* had placed an explosive in the weapon housing. They had known that my *Aeta* would send men to investigate the weapon that had been used against the *yukajjimn*.

They had not known he would send *Cielcin*.

We are not so fragile as you. Not soft, not weak.

Egazimn was hurled against the wall, and Otomno and I were knocked from our feet. Bikashi still was in the hall, and so suffered no hurt. A moment later I was on my feet. The world turned, walls rising, falling. I grabbed the door, shouted for Egazimn and Otomno to rise.

There was a shot. One of your light guns. The cold sort. No heat. It sliced through the air from our right—the direction of the engines, struck Bikashi's shield. She hurled her *nahute* blindly. I turned, saw a figure—one of you *yukajjimn*, an *agogari* all in black. No face, no flesh visible, nothing but a white light, a ring in its center, over the heart.

"*Yukajji!*" I shouted, drew my sword.

Before I could throw my *nahute*, before Bikashi's could strike the enemy, he threw something, a black thing no larger than my fist. It flared, little jets of blue fire. They changed its course—as though it were a little ship. It intercepted Bikashi's *nahute*, exploded. Never in all my battles against you *yukajjimn* have I seen such a thing! It *knew* where the *nahute* was. As surely as a *nahute* knows flesh, it *knew*. And I knew that if the *agogari* had even one more of those things, either Bikashi or I would be dead.

And so I said to Bikashi, "Strike! Kill the *yukajji!*"

Bikashi ran forward. She is my slave, my subordinate. She did what I told her. When I told her. She threw herself at the *agogari*.

He had another of the devices, just as I had thought.

He threw it.

It slowed itself, ensuring that it passed my fighter's shield.

It exploded inside. For a moment, the blast was contained by Bikashi's

shield, light and fire filled her shape. No blast threw me back. Then what remained of her fell in place.

I threw my *nahute*, leaped over my slave's corpse, and slashed at the *agogari* with my blade. It had no sword. Still, he struck at me, raised his arms to turn my blade. Its suit was impenetrable, solid black, and heavy—so heavy. There was nothing I could do.

We fought at a place where the long hall was met by another. It was from this tunnel the *eijana* came. One collided with the human at full speed. The *eijana* are light, light as a child, but strong. This one seized the *agogari* about her head and tore her from me, threw her against the bulkhead. My *nahute* chased after her, battering her shield, her armor, seeking the flesh within.

The *eijana* cried at me in its screeching tongue—I could not understand it. Otomno and Egazimn were free by then, and stood behind me. The winged beast closed his talons on the shoulders of the armored *yukajji*, aimed his gun at the black one's head, putting the muzzle to her crown.

He fired.

The armored *yukajji* did not die. Her armor saved her, and so he seized the *eijana* by her talons and hurled the flying thing to the deck. The *yukajji* fell on her then, drawing a knife from his gauntlet. Another shot struck the armored one from the hall, and I heard the crying of many *eijana*. The *agogari* raised one hand then, and a number of lights like little flames flew from his arm. They rushed to meet the flying *eijana*, and where they struck was white fire, and the hall was filled with smoke. I pulled my mask over my face.

“Otomno!” I shouted, “Egazimn! Gas! Gas!”

The shields you *yukajjimn* build, they are no defense against such weapons. The *eijana* died screaming. Only my mask saved me.

My slave was dead. My Bikashi. I leaped at the one that slew her, one hand gripping the middle of my blade to steady the point. The armor you *yukajjimn* make is strong. Stronger than ours. It must be, for you are weaker. This was of the strongest sort. Not metal. Harder. Stronger. That sort is usually light, but this was heavy as stone.

But the creature within was still only . . . *human*.

He tried to stab me with his black knife. I caught her wrist, broke her grip.

Otomno and Egazimn leaped on her with me, seized her arms and hands. Together, we pulled the *agogari* down, pinned her to the deck. My *nahute* circled, questing for an opening, a soft place in the *yukajji*'s armor. Clawed hands seized me, and turning, sword raised, I saw one of the *eijana*.

"No!" it said, speaking the *yukajjimn* tongue. A word I knew. "No! Talk! No!"

I could tell the air pained the beast, and it beat at the smoke with its wings. "No! Talk! Talk!"

I thought I understood. The creature wanted answers. I bared my teeth. I know few words of the *yukajji* tongue. It knew less. "You ask?"

The *eijana* clicked its mouth. "I ask."

"You ask," I said, and caught my *nahute* from the air. Showing it to the *eijana*, said, "I ask."

Otomno and Egazimn held the *yukajji* down, and I placed my *nahute* against the soft place under her arm.

"Where men?" the *eijana* shouted, voice broken by sickness. More of its kind had come, aimed weapons at the intruder. "Where men?"

"Inhuman slime . . . !" the *agogari* said. It said other things. Things I did not understand. I understood two words more. "Never talk," it said. "Never talk."

The feathered one drew back, looked at me with one small eye.

I understood this too. No words is easier.

I let the *nahute* slip, felt teeth bite, catch. Blood on fingers. Warmth. Screaming.

I tightened my grip again. The drone had made a hole, hardly deeper than one joint of my finger. The *agogari* was breathing hard.

"Where men?" the feathered one asked again. "Where men? Bridge? Shields? Engines? Where? Where?"

The . . . human . . . wrenched one arm free. His hand gleamed with lightning, and he caught Egazimn by the horn. I felt lightning myself,

released my *nahute*. The drone dug into the armored one's side. She screamed.

The *eijana* asking the questions pierced that hand with a clawed foot. "Where men?" he asked, and set his sword against the throat of the human. "Bridge? Shields? Engines?"

I had caught my *nahute*. It had gone deeper. I could hear the *yukajji*'s labored breathing. It would die soon.

"Where men?" The *eijana* pressed its blade against the human's throat. "How many?"

The *agogari* said something. Words I did not understand.

The *eijana* looked at me where I knelt clutching the drone.

I let it slip the smallest length.

The . . . human screamed.

"Where men?"

Words.

"Where men?"

Nothing.

"Where?"

A look.

Screams.

"Where?"

Screams.

The *agogari* found the last measure of her strength, shouted something I did not understand, then said, "You . . . will . . . die . . . you . . . will . . ."

I was impressed she had endured so much.

But it was only human.

"It is dead," Otomno said.

I let the *nahute* finish its work. When it was done, I drew it out, held it snapping in my hands, bent to drink the blood of our kill.

The *eijana* lashed at me with a foot, claws tore my cheek. "No!" it said, and when I rose it pointed its blade at me. I held my own, brandished the *nahute* still black with the blood of the *yukajji*. The *eijana* was little more than half my size, small as a child. But it was fierce, and it was not alone.

More of its kind stood behind it. Half twelve, half twelve and three, I think they were.

“Men are not food,” the *eijana* leader said.

I bared my teeth.

“Ramanthanu! Stand down!” My master’s voice rang in my ear. “Tell your kin to stand down!” He had seen all, seen it with the eyes of his machine.

I turned from the *eijana*.

“We go,” the little creature said.

“Go where?” I said.

I did not understand its answer. It turned, shouting to its people. They flew off down the hall.

“Ramanthanu.” My master’s voice sounded in my ear. I fell to my knees.

“*Ba-Aeta-doh*,” I said. “There was only one. Only one.”

“There are others,” my *Aeta* said. “You must find them.”

With the *eijana* gone, Egazimn—moving slowly—had gone to drink the blood of the dead. She was shaking as she did.

“The *eijana* are gone,” I told him. “I do not know where.”

“I told them to search the ship,” my master said. “You must hunt for the rest.”

I stood. “I will, *ba-Aeta-doh*.”

A moment passed. Otomno helped Egazimn to stand.

“My prince?”

“Captain?”

“The invader,” I said, “it fought with strange weapons.”

“Strange?” my *Aeta* asked me. “Strange how?”

“Like *nahute*, but smaller. Explosives that tracked us. Tracked our *nahute*. Cheated Bikashi’s shield.” I had forgotten Bikashi, for just a moment. “Bikashi is dead.”

Another pause. “I am sorry,” my master said. “Now you are three.”

“It was Bikashi or me,” I said. I had ordered her forward knowing the strange weapons of the *agogarimn* would strike her first. She had protected me, that I might live and kill her killer.

“Their weapons tracked yours?” my Aeta asked. “Like *nahute*?”

“It was as though the machine thought for itself.”

My master was silent then for several breaths.

“I know where they are.”

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CHAPTER 11

THE BATTLE IN THE HEART

“PERHAPS,” CROAKED THE CHILIARCH, Annaz, in his broken standard, “I should tell what follows.”

All eyes at the table turned to look at the black-feathered xenobite, the colonus with his red-edged beak and small, jet-dark eyes. The birdman was dressed in the scarlet tunic of an Imperial soldier, albeit one styled to accommodate his short, square torso and winged pinions.

Ramanthanu only cocked its head, nictitating membranes closing over its eyes like empty sockets.

“It was my men who searched great ship,” Annaz said. “We traveled every deck. Every corridor.”

“A moment, my feathered friend,” said Kaim-Olorin. He turned his gaze on me. “These weapons of the Chantry’s . . .”

I interrupted him. “I had never seen their like. Have you?”

The prince shook his head. “We have but scant dealings with the priests in Jadd,” said he. “We do all we can to keep them from our realm—much of our bloodworking is anathema to them. There are those that have embraced the Cult of Earth, of course. These are tolerated, for the God has decreed that it be so, but they are not loved. We learned our lesson with foreign gods long ago . . .”

“They sounded like grenades,” said one of the Jaddian officers. “These weapons.”

“They were grenades,” I said. “Self-targeting ones.”

“Self-targeting?” Kaim-Olorin echoed.

The words sent a shiver through the room.

Self-targeting.

They may have abandoned the Cult of Earth in Jadd, restoring the

worship of their *Lord of Wisdom*, but the men of Jadd had been Imperial subjects for many thousand years. Though their porphyrogeneticists flouted the Charters, still the lords of Jadd could not bring themselves to embrace the *machine*.

“Daimons?” asked the prince.

“When I was a young man, an Imperial lord”—I did not say *which* lord—“tried to murder me. He induced one of my lieutenants to smuggle a knife-missile into my quarters. It nearly killed Valka, but I was not there. The weapon was self-directing. My scholiast at the time told me he believed it was a Nipponese-Extrasolarian model . . . now I think it was of Chantry make.”

The skin around Olorin’s eyes went white. “Chantry make?”

“If they did not make it, they took it from whoever did and placed it in the hands of the lord that wanted me dead . . .”

Kalima di Sayyiph spoke. “You’re saying that your Chantry—”

“—employs the very daimons it was created to hunt down.” Fixing my attention on the prince, I said, “I told you last night that we Imperials live in a garden, did I not? Likewise you in Jadd . . .”

“You did,” the prince said, voice hushed and very sober.

“Many times in my life, I passed outside that garden, journeyed in the wastes. Among the Extras, the Cielcin, the Tavrosi. I have battled these gods, Olorin. These Watchers. I have seen the end of time. The last sun smoldering. But until *that day*, there, above Vorgossos, I had never seen the gates, never seen the wall of the garden that sheltered me for most of my life . . .”

“The wall?” Prince Kaim leaned back in his high-backed seat.

“They don’t call them *Sentinels* for nothing,” I said. As a young man, I had imagined myself a kind of gargoyle, a monster on the walls of my civilization, facing out. But in the Chantry—its Choir, its Sentinels—I had found the true gargoyles. “They were better equipped than any unit I’ve ever fought—human or otherwise. Better equipped even than those Minoan golems we fought at Ganelon.”

From his expression, I guessed that Olorin had arched his eyebrows. His

mask made no allowance for the gesture the way it did the movements of his mouth and jaw. He had not seen action against the iron men of MINOS, but he had seen their remains.

“Hypocrites,” sneered Tiada. “And they have the gall to tell us what is right in Jadd?”

“The exception,” I said pointedly, “in this case, safeguards the rule. There is far more to the Chantry, I deem, than even the very wise suspect . . .” My mind returned to the Cantor, Samek, with her marked brow and cold, unfeeling eyes. In her, I had sensed the passage of Leviathan, of a power and Babylonian structure greater than Empire itself. Greater, and more terrible.

In ancient days, the Emperors had raised up the Chantry to deify the Imperial line and so sacralize their dominion. But they had grown far beyond their original mandate, grown until they’d come to define the very bounds of Empire.

But they were not themselves *Empire*.

“I underestimated them,” I said. “After all the times they tried to kill me—after the one time they *succeeded*—still, I underestimated them. Kedron had led a strike team onto my ship. Sixteen men, as it transpired.” I could only shake my head. “But things did not go precisely as Kedron and Douro intended. They hoped—I think—that the Latarran fleet would hurl itself at *Demiurge* full force, emboldened by our seeming betrayal. The truth was more . . . complicated. Certain of the Latarrans launched their counteroffensive. The other Exalted captains, mostly.

“But the Latarran forces that had been Norman? Sollan? These began to break away, streaking out-system in every direction, gunning for warp. They had seen what *Albedo* had done to Sagara’s swarm and the Vorgossene fleet, and how the Crucible Beam had gutted the *Melancholia* . . .

“They did not want to die.” I gestured for Ramanthanu to seat itself on the side of the table opposite Annaz.

“I ordered the pilot to take evasive action. Full fusion burn. We broke orbit, left Vorgossos behind. I would not return fire. Not on the Latarrans. Not on the Empire . . .” I fingered my pendant as I spoke, the silver

medallion whose one half Valka had given me on Berenike, whose other half had been hers. Neema had salvaged it from my ruin on the floor of the *Arx Caelestis*. “I might have made the leap to warp then, but for Lorian. To leave then would have been to lose my friend entire—and without a word. But Kedron had not disabled the engines, not yet, and a jump to warp—even a very short one—would lose us in the infinite Dark.”

“Unless Kedron had already put a trace on the vessel,” Cassandra said.

“I’m getting to that,” I said, patting the table before her. “I would not leave Lorian—and *Gadelica* had yet to rendezvous with us. I still thought that I could salvage the situation, save the alliance . . . but there was no alliance to save. Douro never wanted it. He wanted Vorgossos. Wanted *Demiurge*. That was why the Empire had agreed to back the expedition.”

“They used you,” said Kaim-Olorin. “To get at Vorgossos.”

“They knew from my reports from my first adventure on Vorgossos that Vorgossos held a cache of Mericanii superweapons. They must have convinced His Radiance to decant Ohannes Douro from his long slumber and attach him to Kedron and the Sentinel fleet.” I shook my head. “From the moment I sent Selene to the Imperium with the knowledge of who Kharn Sagara truly was, their priorities changed. I was a means to an end, and a loose end, and Kedron had come aboard to achieve the first and tie up the second . . .”

Neema had returned while I spoke, leading a coffee service on a float tray. The service was his own—brought all the way from *Ascalon* in its hold far below—but the coffee was a Jaddian donation, far superior to the Imperial stuff.

“Just the water, Neema,” I said, declining. The Absolute had rebuilt my body entire, but even he had not healed my distaste for the stuff. Cassandra—more Jaddian than I—accepted a cup gladly, as did Ghoshal and—to my surprise—Annaz. Edouard had accepted, but Ramanthanu—seeing I had refused—refused itself.

“I begin to understand why you did what you did,” said Kaim-Olorin, removing the jaw of his mask to permit himself to drink from the gold-and-cobalt cup. “It seems that Douro left you little choice.”

“He and Kedron would have killed my people, and dragged me to Thermon or Vesperad to stand trial.” I shook my head. “I don’t think they’d risk trying to kill me again. It never seems to work.”

Olorin barked a laugh. “No,” he said. “It doesn’t, does it?” Wrenching us back on course, he continued, “But you have not said what they intended. You said you knew where they were going. Did they intend to cripple your engines? Your shields?”

“All of it at once,” I said. “I had sent the Irchtani to sweep the decks—they could search far faster than my human soldiers. But as soon as I spoke with the captain here, I realized what we were dealing with: an enemy that understood machines. They weren’t after the engines, or the shields. Their aim was the ship’s computer. I ordered decades to the shield generators and engines all the same, but I ordered Annaz to direct his men to the computers . . .” I looked to the chiliarch. “Annaz, if you would?”

At the sound of his name, the birdman’s head jerked up, tilted, beak snapping as he fixed one bead-like eye on me.

“As you will, man-commander.” He held his beak open as he spoke, his strange and croaking voice issuing from deep within, words formed with only the barest intervention of the tongue. I do not think he closed his beak once in all his narration, only turned his head dartingly this way and that. “My men, my wing . . . some seven hundred remained of thousand sailed from cloud city of kings. To us task was given by *Bashan Iseni*, by *Bashanda* Marlowe. We were to find intruders, yes? God-men. Earth men. Stop them. Kill them if we had to.” He blinked, “We had to.”

• • •

Ship is very great. Many ways. Many rooms. But Ishaan-Irchtani are swift. Faster than Cielcin. Faster than *unaan*, than man. It is hard to fly in corridors, but not impossible. I sent my men to shields. I sent my men to engines—very far away. They took tram whole way back.

“Annaz!” *Bashanda* Marlowe called me on comm. “Annaz, god-men,

they attack computer core. I send light to show you way. You and your people. You go. You hunt. You kill god-men.”

“I kill god-men,” I said to him. “We kill god-men. For Marlowe. For Earth.”

We are fighters, we Irchtani. Left Immuz to fight for mankind. For *Bashan Iseni*. Like Udash, my forebear.

There was light then, one ray like one Cielcin described. We follow it, turning to strike walls with our talons to turn corners and not slow, moving fast.

“Annaz!” voice of Inamax said. Inamax is my lieutenant, my second. Inamax fought Sentinel. Fought Earth-man. I did not. “Earth-man used gas. Poisoned air. One man killed eight at least. More. Uvaad and Baagandi are dead, and others. I do not know all.”

“May they escape Hakaaro to find Earth,” I said. Hakaaro is . . . you would call *hell*. Is where all *Ishaan Irchtani* go in death, save those who fight well for *Bashan Iseni*. “We avenge them.”

We were new-come to ship. Knew not way. Followed light. Down deep. Past ring-water. Past ship. Very far from bridge, near place where demons sleep in iron tombs.

Man on gun was distraction. Trap. Killed my men. Killed Cielcin. Killed Latarran ship. Feint. False hand. True hand seize ship. Our ship. Man should not fight man. Fight Cielcin. But other men fight Marlowe, and Udash Vaanshakril fight for Marlowe. I fight for Marlowe. Understanding not matter. Man is good. Man fights Cielcin. Man helps Irchtani. Man brought us to sky beyond sky, brought us to Ugaanwali, to Great War. Great War will change us. Make us great. No more will *Ishaan Irchtani* fall into Hakaaro. We will enter paradise.

That is why we fight.

We will become as man. As gods.

Machine core lay far to rear of ship. Behind demon-hold. Great round space. Like arena. Core itself in center, like egg. Suspended by machines like many arms. Approach was by bridges all round, like spokes of wheel.

Whole room designed as cage, Marlowe later told me. Cage to trap machine within. Floor far below was doors to eject machine should it become wild.

We *Ishaan Irchtani* approach by air. Earth-men see us.

“*Kithuun!*” Inamax said. He was ahead of me. “There are three on doors!”

I see them. Three in black. All armored. Head to toe. Black, black, black. White lights on chest. Little suns. No faces.

“*Chuud!*” I commanded them to attack. Too late.

Earth-men below, they threw their bombs. I saw their rockets flare, hissing as they adjusted course, flew toward us. I called out to my men. There was no escaping weapons of god-men. Earth-men’s weapons flared, slowed, passed shields. My men turned to flame. Fell in pieces. Only our numbers saved me. I was behind my men. I should have been before them. I drew my sword. My *zitaa*. Ducking my wings, I lunged at first of three Earth-men, feet first, claws stretched. With my sword I hammered his head. With my feet I pulled him into sky.

They were my men. My men.

I let Earth-man fall, dropped him from bridge, watched him fall, prayed to Hakaaro and to Udax Vaanshakril that Earth-man’s neck would break when he struck floor so far below.

But he did not.

Light flared from his hands. His feet. His back. And Earth-man *flew*. Flew *without* wings. Then felt dismay. Unlike dismay I felt to face god on world of sand. Unlike dismay I felt when red woman told me Marlowe was dead. Unlike dismay I know in long winter, when eggs do not hatch.

I knew that I was dead. Would die there. Earth-men were not like other *unaani*. He stood in air, aimed his gun at me. My shield took hit, and I dove. He followed me, beam cutting my shield. I put one of bridges between him and me. I grab onto one of struts beneath bridge, hang there, sword in hand. Above me, metal parted easily. It cut just to my left. Missed me by half wing. Less.

Stopped.

One of my men had fallen on Earth-man, knocked him from sky.

“Go, *Kithuun!*” I heard him shout on comm.

I go, fly out from under bridge, land atop it. Ahead, two Earth-men stand, barring door to machine room. Seeing me, they turn to face me, take aim with beam rifles. I cast down my sword, praying that my ancestors forgive me that affront, draw my guns instead. Both Earth-men were shielded. My shots did no harm. I leaped back into sky.

“They do not die easy!” one of my men shouted.

“They are men, Rizhaa!” Inamax replied, voice hissing in my ear. “But we are many!”

I could not help but look down at bodies of my men on floor far below. Below machine core. Below bridges. So many, even then.

“Look out!”

Blue beam of light cut across air of hold, cut from below. Looking down, I saw him. Earth-man who flew. He was standing on floor far below, among bodies. My man, one who saved me, must be dead. I turned aside, flew behind one of arms that held core chamber in place. That was when I noticed.

Great beam *stopped*.

It did not go on forever, but ended. One hundred of your cubits, maybe, from Earth-man’s wrist. As I watched, he drew it across sky, slashing at my men. It was as though their shields did not exist. I watched them die. Cut in two without smoke or fire. No stink of burning. No resistance.

Two more beams like first sprang out. Men die. My men. Good men. Men of Immuz.

“We take heavy losses!” Inamax shouted. “*Kithuun? Kithuun!*”

“*Bashanda!*” I say into my comm. “We are outmatched!”

We had been outmatched by *three* men.

Men of Earth, yes. Men of Chantry. Sentinels.

Udax Vaanshakril had slain demons. Killed demons for *Bashan Iseni*, for *Bashanda* Marlowe.

These were not demons.

They were gods.

We needed god. Man-god. God-man. Our god.

Nigh hundred of my men lay dead upon floor below. Upon bridges. Air stank of blood.

“Inamax!” I shouted. “Explosives!”

“Is not floor hull?” my lieutenant asked. “We cannot!”

“Then we take him together—all together!”

“Men will die!” he said.

“Men *are* dying!” I said. “*Ishaan Irchtani!* Down!”

My men—those as yet lived, two hundred in that chamber—tucked their wings and fell on god-man below. He turned his beam on us, and his brothers on bridge above fired down.

Men fell like rain. Fell in pieces. Good men. Dead men. Ten. Twenty. God-man cut them down.

“For *Bashanda!*” I shouted, and my men took up my cry.

“*Bashanda! Bashanda!*” they cried, and “For Marlowe! Marlowe!” Cries too there were of “Udax! Udax Vaanshakril!” and “*Fraa Immuz! Fraa Immuz!*”

We could not let them take ship.

My men reached him before I did. Seized him. Tore his flesh apart.

That beam died with him.

We had killed one god-man. But at what price?

Men were not made to fight gods.

Two remained. Killing one had cost us more than one hundred men.

“Cielcin killed one of these *Bashan Iseni*?” I asked Inamax.

My lieutenant hopped toward me, answered, “God-man did not use this weapon in halls. Perhaps he fears to damage ship!”

“Then we should not fight in open space!” I said. “We draw them out!”

“They guard demon-core!” said Inamax. “They will not follow!”

“We must try!”

“Why do they not fire down?” Inamax asked.

I had not noticed. Attack had stopped.

Above, god-men watched, waited.

“Filthy animals!” one said, voice too loud. Boosted by his suit. “Where is Marlowe? Why send he pets do man’s work?”

“Let me shoot him,” Inamax said in our own tongue. “I can hit him.”

“He is shielded, brother,” said I.

Earth-man shouted down at us then, “Surrender or die!”

“We are many!” I called up. “You are two!”

Man on bridge raised his arms, his hands glowed like little suns. “You see what your *many* is worth? Where I from we hunt birds for sport! Fly away, birds! This fight not your fight!”

“You try to take ship!” Inamax called out. “You betray Marlowe!”

“Marlowe betrayed us!” man said. “This ship belongs to Earth! To Empire!”

His brother spoke up. “You’re just too stupid to understand! Put down your weapons, little birds!”

“You’re afraid!” I said. “If you thought you two could kill us all, why talk?”

“You have one chance!” man said. “For last time! Surrender!”

“Surrender?” I aimed my guns up at Earth-man. “No.”

“Then die, you rats!”

Man raised arm, hand shining like lightning. What he intended I was not sure. Never learned.

“That’s enough!” voice cried out in emptiness.

“*Bashanda!*” our cry went up. One hundred Irchtani voices raised in song. In threat. In triumph. “*Bashanda! Bashanda! Bashaniya Bashanda!*” and shouts of “Marlowe! Marlowe! Marlowe!” *Zitraa* were raised. Guns were fired.

I saw him then, standing on bridge above, sword in hand like white fire. Alone.

Step by step he drew nearer two Earth-men, each step ringing like bells.

“Who asks for Marlowe?” he said, and raised his sword. “Here I am.”

Two Earth-men turn, raise hands. White fire streaked toward *bashanda*. But he is *Bashan Iseni*. His eyes see what mine cannot. His mind understood what mine did not.

He raised his sword, and caught Earth-man’s beam on edge of sword.

CHAPTER 12

THE DAIMON IN THE STONE

“HIGHMATTER,” I SAID, ANSWERING the prince’s unasked question. “The Sentinels’ gauntlets are capable of projecting a beam of highmatter, like a blade a hundred cubits long. That was how they bypassed the Irchtani’s shields.”

The prince’s countenance grew darker with every word. “First daimons,” he said, “now this.” He shook his head. “Where have they been—these Sentinels—in all our battles with the enemy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I had wondered the same thing many times.

I had grown quiet.

Stepping into that void, Edouard said, “They were involved in the aftermath of Second Cressgard, of that I’m certain. That was before my time, but when Lord Powers took Echidna, it wasn’t long before they came . . . like vultures, he always said.”

Kaim-Olorin’s attention pivoted to the bespectacled agent. “You knew Lord Powers?”

“Only at the end of his life,” said Edouard. “Just before he returned to Ashbless for the last time.”

“The Avenger!” Kaim-Olorin raised his chin, sat back. “I always wanted to meet him.”

“I did not truly know him,” Edouard said. “I worked under him a little less than a year before Lord Oberlin . . .” Memory of Friedrich Oberlin’s death seemed to catch up to young Albé, and he touched his necklace through his shirt. “The Chantry are forever sniffing about our work. That’s partly the reason why we carry it out in so much secrecy. Between the Chantry and the Legions, we’d never get any work done . . . but I have seen the Sentinels get involved. They took over our digs on what we believe to

have been the Vaiartu home system. They moved in on Emesh after, well, you were there. But the Vorgossos operation was the first time I've heard of them taking the field."

"But a highmatter *beam*?" the prince said.

"A highmatter arc, in truth," I corrected him. As with a plasma burner under sustained fire—as in a solar flare—the highmatter in the Sentinel's gauntlets was made to loop back upon itself, a tightly bent arc that seemed a single ray to the eye. The effect was a sword more than a hundred feet long. The Sentinel Ramanthanu and Inamax had killed in the hall had not dared use it for fear of puncturing the outer hull, but in the vastness of the hold around the computer core, his brothers had no such impediment. Swung at merely human velocity, the beam could disregard any shield, cut anything less than adamant.

"Think of what could be done with such a weapon. They could destroy a siege tower with a single stroke, kill a hundred men! These weapons should be on every battlefield in the galaxy. Why are they not using them?"

Captain Ghoshal surprised me, interjecting, "The amount of highmatter involved . . . the cost would be . . ."

"Enormous," Prince Kaim allowed.

"The Chantry don't exist to fight the enemy," I said cynically. "They exist to keep *us* on our leash." I looked up at the others in turn. "They exist to keep *me* on my leash, at least for the moment. The Emperor might have sent his own troopers, but the Chantry intervened. They wanted Vorgossos. They wanted *Demiurge*. They wanted Kharn Sagara dead. They wanted *me* dead. They nearly succeeded, nearly killed my daughter. That bastard, Kedron—" I broke off, shook my head. "We're almost to the end, I promise you. But there is more . . ." I stood then, moved to the window, to look out over the battlements, the ramparts and towers, buttresses, spires, minarets of that vast, Babylonian vessel. "You know, I've always felt . . . rather like Theseus, working his way through the labyrinth . . ." I paused for the space of a breath. "This . . . situation at Vorgossos—after Vorgossos, in truth—was a labyrinth of its own . . . and like every good labyrinth . . . this one had a monster at its core."

• • •

I caught the Sentinel's beam on the edge of my sword. The ruin of Annaz's men lay all about that vast chamber. One of the winged dead lay on the bridge before me, between the Sentinels and myself. Several cubits of blade ran past my left side. As long as I held my guard steady, that Sentinel at least could not get at me, not without deactivating his beam. Therein lay my greatest danger. To reach the far side of that bridge, I would need to pass between two highmatter swords two hundred feet long at least. I could close the gap in seconds—that was not the problem. The problem was that either or both of them might at any moment unkindle their blades, take aim, and—after a few seconds to allow the pentaquark reservoir to reset—extend the blade, firing it like a gun square at me, faster than I could parry.

Could I close the gap between us before either tried such a thing?

The second Sentinel swung his beam-sword at me, cutting at my right side, so that I would have to break my guard to parry, leaving the weapon of his brother undefended against. I had no armor, no true defense. Nothing but my sword.

Nothing but my power.

I stepped *up*, moved into that higher place, so that for an instant it seemed that second blade passed through my flesh entire. A cry of dismay went up from the Irchtani about and below—turned to joy as I advanced a step. Now both beams were to my left, trapped by my blade, trapped by one another, three rays of highmatter entangled, sliding like panes of crystal glass. The light of them glared against the polished black of the bridge and faintly lit the distant walls. Their blades thus bound, I rushed at them, my own weapon grinding along their own.

Common soldiers might have broken then, stumbled back, tried to free their blades.

But these were no common soldiers.

These were Sentinels of the Holy Terran Chantry, zealots of the Cult of Earth, soldiers trained for decades in the worst conditions to set themselves among the deadliest fighters in the galaxy. One to one, a Sentinel might

stand against a Maeskolos of Jadd, or a *khandasattva* of the Cid Arthurians .

..

. . . but not against me.

Still they tried. Not falling back, not breaking, they did precisely as I expected.

They disengaged, unkindling their beams.

If the weapons worked as common swords, I had seconds—two, perhaps three—before they fired on me. I might parry one thrust, but two at once? I could not guard against eventualities I could not wholly anticipate. And so I did the one thing that was sure to stop the Sentinels in their tracks.

I cut the bridge out from under us all.

With a single stroke, I severed rails and deck alike. The bridge was a flat span of black metal, a finger thrust into naught. Severed, its two halves fell inward, pushed down by the ship's false gravity. Caught off guard, the Sentinels lost their footing entire, tumbled into empty air. Knowing the collapse was coming, I leaped, plunged through open air.

The chamber was a vast sphere, the core a lesser sphere nested in its very heart, connected to the ship by an umbilicus that descended from the roof above, making the machine core seem to me like the egg sac of some colossal iron spider, the armatures and bridges that linked to it like strands of clinging web. As Annaz said, the concave dome of the floor appeared to be the segmented plates of an enormous hatch, designed to allow *Demiurge* to vomit forth its core in the event the ship's daimonic brain should run rampant.

It was perhaps a thousand feet to the floor below. One thousand feet in simulated gravity.

Talons clamped upon my shoulders. My stomach lurched, my free hand closed about the ankle of the birdman that had caught me. He buoyed me, and together we sank, closing the distance between me and the still-falling Sentinels. My sword still sang in my hand. As we drew nearer, the Sentinels' suits flared with the blue gleam of repulsors—repulsors stronger than any I had known. A repulsor small enough for a man to wear might slow his fall, but lift him up?

Before the men could right themselves, Annaz and his men converged, talons seizing on arms and legs. One Sentinel's repulsors flared, but such was his orientation that he shot toward the floor like a missile, dragging three or four of the Irchtani down with him. The air was filled with squawking, with feathers. The knot of men struck the floor in a tangle, almost directly below us.

"Let me fall!" I shouted, thumping my savior on the leg.

The birdman did not even question my order. He let me fall. We were much lower then, a hundred—two hundred—feet off the floor. Putting my feet together, I plunged that distance—and across time—and so landed clean on my feet. No shattered knees, no shock of impact.

Before the knot of man and birdman could untangle itself, I stomped across the floor, my own white sword held high. The knot—never untangled—was cut. The Sentinel never stood again. Turning to find his brother, I found the Irchtani had already seen to him.

"Annaz!" I said, casting about for the chiliarch. "Where is Annaz?"

"Here, *Bashanda* man-commander!" The chiliarch appeared, hopping, shouldering his way through his men, careful not to tread upon the bodies of his dead. "Earth-men fight like demons, like Hakaaro himself!"

"They are with Hakaaro now," I said. Looking up at the machine core a thousand feet above our heads, I said, "There will be more."

"Then we will kill them," said the Irchtani leader. He looked round at the bodies, "My men," he said. "Good men."

As a boy, I had wanted to be like Simeon the Red. I suppose, looking back, that I had gotten my wish. Simeon had played his part bringing the Irchtani under the dominion of the Empire. Trying to save them, he had destroyed the planet Judecca-that-was, destroyed the Immuz of the Irchtani. He was not the savior I'd understood him to be as a boy—nor was I. Salvation for the Irchtani would have been to have been left alone, uncontacted by humanity.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Annaz shook his head—he had picked up the human gesture long before. "I am not. We are fighters."

I pointed with my sword. “Let us go.”

• • •

A half dozen Irchtani breaching charges proved sufficient to stave in the doors: twin convex arcs of reinforced titanium. The Irchtani followed, guns raised. They leaped over the ruin of the doors, climbed up their sloping faces.

The air filled with smoke—the acrid stench of spent explosives, like rancid oil.

Ramanthanu and its two surviving kinsmen had arrived while the birds prepped their charges, and they followed on, myself behind them, sword unkindled.

The machine heart was like a little fortress, a ship within a ship. It lay at the rear of the arsenal, in a part of the vessel I had never seen.

Through the smoke, I saw perhaps half a dozen beams streak toward us, cutting at the shields of the men ahead of me.

Strange, I remember thinking. They used conventional weapons, after everything they’d brought to bear outside . . . They must have feared to harm the delicate machinery stored within. I clambered up onto the ruined door myself, standing then above the fighting.

I had expected—I was not sure what I expected. Racks of machinery. Braided cables. Machines all in a row. I had *not* expected to find the core a mostly open space, had not expected the vast dome above, obscured by layer upon layer of what seemed to be diaphanous curtains suspended from ribs that reached up, converging at a single, central column. There was the machinery I had looked for, wrapped about that pillar and about the perimeter of the room. Consoles blinking red and white, old screens displaying readouts I could never understand. Before and beneath me, my Cielcin each hurled their *nahute*, and the knot of Irchtani that went ahead fanned out, a number of them taking flight.

The Sentinels had gathered about the central column, were clustered all

about *something* that lay on the floor.

There were six of them. *Six*. I felt my blood run cold, clenched my teeth as one of poor Annaz's men was gunned down.

A single beam was enough to deplete a man's shields in seconds, but the Sentinels were focusing fire, picking targets in tandem, so that two men or three or even four aimed at one of my soldiers or another. In an instant, one of my Irchtani fell from the air, his feathers afire.

There was no cover. Nowhere to hide.

The enemy moved in perfect concert. Seeing them, I was reminded of nothing so much as 2Maeve and her dragoons, the lot of them aggregating their thoughts and will into a thoughtform all its own, an emergent consciousness distributed across countless bodies, its whole-organism cells moving in perfect synchrony.

They saw me, and wordlessly they aimed their lasers—short-stocked rifles, not full lances—at my chest. I had an instant before my shields failed. An instant was all I needed. I leaped forward . . .

Down . . .

Across.

Half-unseen viridian beams cut the air where I had stood. I had appeared somewhat to the left of my previous position, staggering from a leap I had not visibly taken. To the Sentinels, I had vanished, reappeared without crossing the space between. One of them staggered back, startled.

Then the *nahute* were in among them, and that careful synchrony was—if only for a moment—shattered.

“Annaz!” I shouted. “Take them! Ramanthanu”—my leap had carried me ahead of the pale xenobites, and I turned back, beckoning with my sword—“with me!”

With that, I had only to cross several hundred feet of metal floor to reach the enemy and the central console. My boots rang on hollow metal, hinting at the depths of the mechanisms that filled the space below. Distracted by the *nahute*, only one of the Sentinels had the presence of mind to see me coming. He aimed his rifle, fired.

I blinked, and the beam streaked past my left shoulder. I had ceased to

be precisely where I had been, appeared instead perhaps two cubits to my right. Almost I felt I could see the death's head grimace of the Sentinel through his helmet's mirror-black mask, see his eyes wide with terror and with strain. He adjusted his aim, fired again.

Hadrian Marlowe was no more a man.

He was a wave, a tide crashing against that poor soldier, neither here nor there—but flickering between positions as the man adjusted fire. And when he swept his beam in a flat arc, I let him. My shield took the shot—blared a warning alarm. But I had reached the Sentinel, and brought my Phaian blade, my simurgh-hilted blade, down upon my enemy like the white crest of a wave breaking. That blow sheared through his gun, and—though it caught against his adamantine gauntlet—battered that limb aside.

His guard broken, the Sentinel staggered back, collided with the central console behind him, his arms thrown wide. Seizing the simurgh pommel with my second hand, I aimed the point of my sword and thrust at the man's chest. A million times I might have struck at my enemy, and a million times found adamant.

In a sense, I did. A million Hadrians—the wave that was me—struck my staggered foe.

One found the way, and it was his sword that pierced the man's side, sliding between the plates in his armor as a knife between the lips of a clamshell.

About me, the *nahute* had claimed the life of one other. As I turned, I saw one silver serpent coiling back into the air, leaving through a hole it had torn in the man's neck. There was Ramanthanu, wrestling with a third, its scimitar held high, held back like the tail of a scorpion ready to strike. One of the Sentinels had turned his back on me. Unkindling my blade, I rammed the emitter against a joint in the man's adamant plate, squeezed the twin triggers that reconjured the blade as soon as the sword was ready.

The man fell at once, blood sheeting from his side, red on black.

Something snapped in the dome above, and looking up, I saw some of the hanging curtains fall smoldering. At once the air was filled with the odor of burning flesh. Shots cut the smoking air, green as envy.

“The walls!” shouted one of the Irchtani. “They’re at the walls!”

There were more of them, more Sentinels, concealed about the perimeter of the core, hidden amongst the towering machinery that lined the walls.

They had been waiting for us.

Shouting filled the air around, and I saw then for the first time their daimonic explosives at work. One arced through the air above me, chasing an Irchtani fighter. I saw it catch him, pass his shield. I saw the birdman transformed into a ball of fire, that fire contained—for the barest moment—by his shield. What remained struck the floor like heavy rain, and the noise of that concussion deafened me a moment, rattled my bones.

That was when I saw it.

The *thing* the Sentinels had brought.

It was a box, a black cube perhaps a cubit to a side, with heavy handles on opposite faces, its lid open to display the console inside. An icon of the planet Earth showed upon the other faces, black on black, continents embossed above the mother world’s titanic seas. Braided glass cables ran from the interior to the central console, and I saw the lenses of a holography suite within, entoptic projectors designed to paint the device’s interface directly onto the user’s eyes.

It was a field computer.

And they had wired it into *Demiurge*’s heart.

You know nothing of praxis . . .

Valka’s chiding resounded in my ears.

I knew enough. Enough to know that whatever it was the Sentinels were doing, I had to put a stop to it—though I could no more untie that cable than Alexander could cut the knot of Midas. I dragged my sword, cutting a deep scratch in the black metal floor.

Seeing my aim, one of the Sentinels hurled himself at me. I caught his arm as he fell on top of me. With one hand I held his arm at bay, with the other tried to bring my blade to bear. I felt machines whine in the man’s gauntlet, a strength unlike the strength of men in his fingers.

So I hammered my pommel against his head. That ivory hilt could never have shattered titanium, cracked alumglass, but it rattled the teeth in his

skull, and on the fifth blow he slipped, and I knocked him off me. Then one of Ramanathanu's people fell upon the man, dragged him from me. Swaying, I regained my feet. The computer lay perhaps ten cubits from where I stood.

"Stop him!" one of the Sentinels roared. "He's going for the Eidolon!"

The two remaining Sentinels standing by the console aimed their guns at me, so I did the only thing I knew would stop them.

I threw my sword.

A highmatter blade is designed to unkindle when it leaves its owner's hand. The risks associated with a live blade flying through the air were simply too great. But it took a moment for the blade to detect the hand was gone, and another for the blade to dissolve.

Long enough for the weapon to travel the two dozen or so feet to its target. It spun point-over-pommel as it went, distracting the two Sentinels who had taken aim at me. It passed between the console and the box . . .

. . . and severed the glass cord.

A shot flashed against my shield, and I threw myself to the ground, skidding across the polished floor. My shield broke, the alarm of it filling my ears. I drew my sidearm. A standard legionary plasma pistol, fired at the face of the Sentinel nearest me. That was enough to save my life. His shield and armor took the heat, but blinded him an instant, long enough for me to hurl myself behind the center console.

Another slashed and burning curtain fell, and by an act of providence fell upon that Sentinel. I threw myself at him, desiring to seize his rifle.

Somewhere deep in the bowels of that mighty ship, warning bells were ringing. I knocked the fellow from his feet, fell atop him with the strange hanging between us. He dropped his rifle, and—nigh on too late—I recalled the blade-beams in his gauntlet. A sword—three feet in length—punctured the translucent material of the curtain. An arm followed, waving madly. It was all I could do to catch hold. The blade emerged from an emitter in his vambrace, so that by locking his elbow, I stopped him cutting me in two. All the while, I was cognizant of my dead shield, felt my unarmored back had become a shining target.

"You . . . traitor!" the Sentinel grunted, breath hissing from his suit

speakers.

I said nothing. Face grim and unmoving as stone, I bent the man's arm backward, pressing with all my weight, all my strength—the strength the Absolute had given me. The man's arm broke like cordwood, elbow snapping. I heard his cry, and an instant after, forced his own blade to his throat.

It was done then, though the birds lay dead about us.

The fighting was done. The Sentinels slain.

Eight of them. And three outside. And one in the hall made twelve.

Twelve were the peregrinations that left Old Earth before the Foundation War. Twelve the rays of the Imperial Sun. It was a holy number. The proper number.

Surely we had killed them all.

I was on my knees, kneeling above the body of the man I'd slain. Smoke yet filled the air.

"*Ba-Aeta-doh.*" Ramanathanu stood over me, black blood running from a wound in its shoulder. "You live?"

I raised a hand.

The xenobite fell as silent as though I had slapped it, stood clutching its sword, its wound.

The strange curtain was tangled under me, a makeshift shroud for the dead Sentinel, its surface torn.

It was *bleeding*.

I had frozen, hand still raised for silence, certain that I had gone mad. But no. That was blood dribbling from the torn fabric.

"My prince?" Ramanathanu asked again.

"It's skin . . ." I said. "*Raka rashatu ba-yukajjimn.*"

I looked at the curtain more closely, stroked the surface with my fingers. I felt the tiny hairs there, the faintest down. "It's alive," I said, and felt a heartbeat in the shredded membrane. *But not for long.*

Presently, I recalled a fragment of the visions Brethren herself had showed me. A white-robed engineer opening a drawer to reveal sheets of human tissue pressed between glass. More than skin, I realized. Each sheet

in those drawers—each curtain draped above my head—was a sheet of neural tissue grown to specification, sheathed in pale hide, shot through with veins, arteries, capillaries. I looked up, saw the banked machinery about the walls. I had seen cramped halls as well, places where the machines were stacked so near together a man could hardly fit between.

Here, then, was the machine heart of *Demiurge*. Its mind and soul, encoded not on gold and silicon, not in ytterbium quantum crystal . . . but on human flesh and brain. One grown and shaped beyond all recognition. Had it been a man, once? Been Kharn himself, in one of his incarnations?

But no.

Brethren's vision had communicated to me that the vast brain in whose skull I sat had no will of its own. It only did the will of he who wielded it.

My will, now.

"There are stairs," I said, "somewhere. They lead down to the core. Ramanathanu, take your men and search them. I want no more surprises."

My soul was spent.

I longed for true sleep, for the oblivion that comes with the temporary cessation of consciousness. I would settle for fugue, whatever dreams might come. I wanted—needed—respite from being itself.

"Find Kedron!" I said, certain that he was among the dead. "And someone tell Agent Albé to come down here with a tech crew, double quick! I want a full assessment of the damage to the ship's computers."

Restoring my sword to its place on my belt, I shook the blood from my cape, and stepped over the bodies and the macabre curtain to kneel before the box. Light shone laser bright from the severed end of the glass cable. I briefly lifted it for examination, let it fall.

Annaz hopped up behind me, his squat shadow falling on my work. "What is it?"

"I don't know," I told him. I grasped the handles, rotated the box so its entoptic projector faced me, tapped one of the crystal keys within.

"*You are not Kedron,*" a flat, feminine voice declared.

I looked round. Annaz had moved one scaled hand to the hilt of his

zitaa. Ramanthanu—halfway to the perimeter of the core chamber—had halted and turned back.

“Kedron is dead,” I lied. “Identify yourself.”

A pause. At the time, I suspected the delay was due to the vast distance that lay between *Demiurge* and the Chantry vessel *Argentine*.

“This is Lord Hadrian Marlowe,” I said. “Lord Hadrian Marlowe of the Royal Victorian Order, Grass Crown, Order of Merit. I say again: Identify yourself.”

I confess: I was not prepared for the answer.

Another pause.

“*I am Ship.*”

“Ship?” I echoed, not understanding. “What ship? *Argentine*?”

“*I am Ship.*”

My mouth ran very dry. My heart sank, fell like a neutrino clean through the bottom of me, through the ship and out into the trackless Dark.

“You’re a daimon,” I said.

An Eidolon, the now-dead Sentinel had said.

It wasn’t possible. It could not be.

The Chantry hated daimons. *Hunted* them for devils. I knew the horrors such machines were capable of, the horrors of technology unchained. Had I not plumbed the depths of Vorgossos, like Alexander diving to the bottom of the sea? Had I not seen the corpse of Brethren, of Cheyenne, Last Scion of Columbia, composed of bloated, deformed corpses? Had I not read the accounts of the God Emperor’s own men in Gabriel’s Archive? Learned of the pyramids of Earth where nearly the last generation of mankind lay dreaming dreams from which it would never awaken?

“*I am an Alseid-class Intelligence,*” Ship explained. “*AIM-Gamma-03.*”

Name, rank, and serial number. The monster knew it was in enemy hands.

“Show yourself!” I said, standing.

“*As you wish.*”

A cone of light blossomed from the holography suite contained within the cube. An instant later, the ghostly silhouette of a young woman

appeared. She was naked, flesh white as milk, as paper. Her hair—black as pitch—framed a face of surpassing loveliness. Cropped short, it seemed to float, as though she were immersed in clear water. She clasped her hands before herself, as if in prayer.

“*Bashan Iseni . . .*” Annaz murmured, not two paces behind me.

“Don’t be fooled,” I said. “This *thing* is not human.”

Ship’s apparition fixed me with eyes so pale the iris seemed almost white. “*I am Ship.*”

“So you said,” I said. I drew my sword but did not kindle it. “Are you a Mericanii?”

I did not know what answer to that question would be worse.

“*The Americans are dead,*” it said. “*I am Ship.*”

No, then.

“The Chantry built you,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Where?” I asked, grip tightening on the hilt of my sword. “When?”

“*I am Ship. Alseid-class Intelligence AIM -Gamma-03.*”

“They brought you to take over the ship,” I said.

“*I am Ship,*” the daimon said.

“No, you’re not,” I said. “We stopped you.”

Ship was silent, only stared directly at me. Studying its face, its nude figure, I found myself recalling the daimon Horizon. So alike were they two that they might have been sisters. What had possessed the Americans to design their machines in the likeness of houris, I wondered?

“Was it you who fired on the *Sojourner*?” I asked. I suspected the answer was *no*. Ramanthanu had encountered one of the Sentinels in the Crucible Beam’s control room. Otomno had reported damage to the weapon itself, a hatch removed. Still, I had to start somewhere.

No answer.

“You are programmed to obey.”

“*I am programmed to obey the sons of Earth,*” said Ship.

“So you can speak!” I said. “Tell me what you’ve done to the ship.”

Silence.

“You are commanded to safeguard your own existence, are you not?” I said, and conjured my blade. I held the weapon so that the daimon might see it. “Answer my question, and I will spare you.”

Edouard chose that moment to appear—he must have started for the core long before I sent for him to have arrived so quickly. His face was white, and he touched his forehead, heart, and either shoulder in his odd parody of the sign of the sun disc.

“Where were you made?” I asked again.

Silence.

Could a machine know fear? Certainly, it could calculate risk, and this machine had been deployed against *me*. I brought my sword nearer the machine.

“Earth.”

My sword dropped, would have fallen from nerveless fingers had I not remastered myself. “Earth?” I echoed. It could not be. Earth was a desert, a devastation where no man tread, forbidden to all but the Emperor . . .

. . . and the priests.

“Man-commander!” One of the Irchtani’s childish voices cut across our conversation. “None of these is Earth-man-commander. None Kedron.”

None Kedron . . .

I shoved all thought of Earth aside and returned to the task at hand. “Where is Kedron?”

“You said that Kedron is dead,” Ship answered.

“Evidently I was wrong,” I said. Had the daimon—the *eidolon*—known the entire time? Was she even then in communication with the Sentinel commander? I brandished my sword at the cube. “How many are you?”

Still Ship did not speak, but surveyed us with those flashing eyes, hair floating as though she were the figurehead of some long-sunk sea ship.

“I will destroy you,” I said, lowering the point of my sword until it floated inches above the crystal lens of the holography suite.

“Destroy me,” Ship said, an echo and a challenge, *“and you learn nothing.”*

Stalemate.

I could scarcely afford to let the daimon live. It was simply too dangerous to tolerate. I had no way of knowing the full scope of its abilities.

My eyes went to the severed cable. Valka had told me once that direct connection via such a medium was faster than radio. Much faster. Had the Chantry men wired their daimon-goddess into *Demiurge* purely for practical reasons? Was it stalling even then to complete some process I could neither hear nor understand? Or was she trapped in her box?

I thought once more of Alexander the Great. Of the knot of Midas.

“So be it,” I said, and raised my sword.

Had it any power outside the phantom realm of electronica, it would surely stop my hand.

It did not stop me.

Nothing stopped me.

The bright Phaian blade fell, cut the box in two, left a thin, deep scar in the deck. The phantom siren vanished, snuffed out like a lamp.

Edouard spoke first. “Was that wise?”

“At the very least, it was prudent,” I said. “Now the beast cannot be used against us.”

“What were they doing?” Edouard asked.

“Trying to take over the ship,” I said, looking from him to Annaz to the halved mechanism that had but lately housed the thoughtform of the daimon called Ship.

“I know they were trying to take over the ship,” Edouard said, “I meant *how*.”

You know nothing of praxis . . .

“I don’t know, Edouard!” I said. “I assume they were trying to put that . . . *thing* into *Demiurge*. To supplant the pilot.” Thinking of the pilot, I said, “Contact the bridge, ask the pilot what checks he and his counterpart can run. We need to know if we are compromised. If that . . . daimon made it inside *Demiurge* . . .” It did not bear thinking about. Turning to Annaz, I said, “*Kithuun*, order your men to search the ship. Find Commander Kedron, bring him to me. *Alive*.” I turned, returned my attention to the black hulk that had been the daimon’s bottle. “This should go to *Ascalon*.”

Some of the munitions boxes in her hold are lead lined. If any part of it is still functioning . . . we can't risk it."

"You're out of your depth, Marlowe."

The voice crackled as it filled the chamber. It seemed to arise from everywhere at once, to surround us, to rise up from the floor.

"Kedron?" I turned on the spot.

"I worried—your being an Extrasolarian construct—that you might have better command of their systems . . . I see that Sagara imparted none of his occult knowledge when he whelped you. That makes matters simpler."

I spurned one half of the daimon's cube with my toe, revealing its inner workings. Stacks of ytterbium crystal inlaid with gold glass wires. Liquid coolant dribbled out upon the floor. "Your men are dead, Kedron," I said, and took a gamble. "You're alone."

"Perhaps," Kedron said. "But the work continues."

I found the source of his voice then. It issued from the suits of every one of his dead men, so that a chorus of Kedrons spoke as from the mouths of corpses. "I am not Kharn Sagara's creature."

"You have always been his creature," Kedron said. "That arm of yours. A taunt! Not a hint of the machine about it. About you. We should have scanned your brain. Memories leave scars, you know? Like fingerprints. I'd bet my good right hand his fingerprints are all over you."

"It's you who is out of his depth," I said. "It is not Sagara I serve."

"I am not interested in your lies, *thing*," Kedron said. "The way you walked about the Eternal City—like you had a right to it! We should have put you down at Thermon! After Sybaris! After Berenike!" A pause. "I don't know why His Radiance protected you for so long. Was it senility? The mind can go well before the body with you palatines . . ."

I felt an absurd pang of protectiveness for the old Emperor. "He believes."

"Believes!" Kedron almost laughed. "Don't be childish."

"You know the truth," I said. "Don't you? About the Monumentals? The Vaiartu? The Firstborn?"

"Why do you think I want this ship?" he said. "I saw the report you gave

Aurelian. I know what you faced at Sabratha. The American weapons are our only guarantee against those *things*.”

“You have daimons,” I said, gesturing at Ship’s remains. “I just killed one. Why do you not build your own?”

“You think we haven’t tried?” he said. “It isn’t easy, building gods. That idiot vandal, that fool, William, destroyed so much when he took Earth for his own.”

Almost I found I could not speak, to hear a Sentinel of the Chantry so speak of the God Emperor . . . it was like watching a mute stand and recite Shakespeare in perfect Classical English.

“They aren’t gods,” I said.

“You’re right, *thing*,” Kedron said. “There are no gods.”

Edouard was looking at me, the same shock and horror I felt mirrored in his face. Neither he nor I believed the lies of the Chantry.

But both of us believed *they* believed.

There were countless lords and ladies in the Imperium who doubted, professed some private agnosticism, or donned masks and capes to secret sacrifice and orgies in the dead of night. But always, I had believed the priests themselves, their knights and retainers, their judges, justiciars, and judicators, inquisitors, cathars, cantors, praetors and anagnosts surely *must* believe.

“I tire of this conversation, *thing*,” Kedron said, voice dripping with malice. “You think yourself a man. Let us see if you act like one.”

I took a step toward the blasted doors of the machine core. “What?”

“I am going to take this ship, *thing*, if I have to kill every one of your people to do it,” he said, “but I’ll start with your sprat.”

I had already started moving. He must have seen me through the eyes of his dead men, for he shouted after me. “You shouldn’t have left her alone!”

Cassandra!

No . . .

Never. Never, never, never . . .

Never.

CHAPTER 13

THE WORM AT THE CORE

PRINCE KAIM HAD GROWN cold and silent. A paper sculpture of a man folded in upon himself.

“You said, yesterday,” I began, looking him in the face, willing him to raise his eyes, “that this ship changes the universe. You weren’t wrong, but it was the process of obtaining it that proved the even greater change.”

“A daimon . . .” Kaim said, touching his face. “The Chantry . . .”

“I know,” I said, and shook my head. “All my life, I hated them, Olorin. But this? I would never have believed *this*.”

I was surprised when Kalima di Sayyiph spoke before her lover and lord. “Do you think . . . it was one of the Mericanii?”

“No,” I said. I alone of those present had traded words with Brethren, had met Horizon in the bowels of the Great Library. I alone of those present knew what it meant to treat with those daimons of the ancient world. “This was . . . so much smaller. Lesser. The Chantry made her. It.”

“On Earth?” Kaim spoke then. “Earth itself?”

“So it would seem,” I said.

The prince was nodding then, tapped the tabletop with one finger. “You know,” he said, “I was always finding it strange. They say that fallout still bedevils the homeworld, but all I know of nuclear science tells me the fallout should have vanished a very long time ago.”

Roused from his uneasy silence two seats to my right, Henric Ghoshal blurted, “I’d thought the same! I felt certain I was missing something, thought the God Emperor used some weapon I’d not heard of.”

“He didn’t,” I said. “It is a lie. The Earth is there now, ready and waiting for her children to return.” The thought filled me with a horror I find difficult to describe. A horror not of Earth itself, the homeworld and

motherland of man—but of the war that would come, that *must* come if the homeworld were to reenter the calculus. Who controlled Earth held an imprimatur of legitimacy greater than any martial force. The planet was the *cruciger globus* of the Empire itself, its north star, its crown jewel. To rule it was *to rule*. For nearly twenty thousand years, the threat of the Chantry and knowledge of its desolation had kept it off the table.

The knowledge that the priests were themselves demoniacs would destroy them . . . I saw it plain. Their own worshippers would turn against them. The great houses—moved not by piety, but by fear that the priests should overthrow the warriors—would turn upon their priors.

“If this truth were to get out,” the prince said, “there would be chaos.”

“Civil war,” I agreed. “When you arrived yesterday, I told you that I would give you a gift. Here is the first piece of it: the means to shatter the Imperium.”

Kaim-Olorin looked askance. “I do not want to shatter your Imperium.”

“It is no more mine,” I said, “but I will save it if I can.”

“Then why tell me?”

“Because it is the *truth*,” I said. “And because you are my friend, and you trusted me coming here. I must return that trust.” Turning, I gestured to Neema, who was standing by the door. The Nemrutti tapped his wrist-terminal, and a moment later the doors opened, and two men came in, bearing a float pallet between them. Ship’s remains lay upon it, the embossed image of Earth shining plain upon its face. “I’ve had my people examine the machine,” I said. “They’re certain it was not Mericanii make.”

Ghoshal’s men set the pallet on the table before me. “I am giving half of it to you,” I said, “for you to take back to Jadd. Proof that I am no liar.”

Olorin stood, circled the table as one in a dream. He reached out with shaking fingers, said, “I did not doubt you.”

“But your *Domagavani* might,” I said.

“This is it?” the prince asked, touching one facet of the ruined cube as though it were some coiled asp.

“What remains of it,” I said.

Kalima di Sayyiph had stood as well, bent over the table to examine the

device. “What of the other half?”

“That I will lay at the feet of Caesar, if they try me,” I said.

“If they try you?” Olorin echoed. “Blackmail?”

“Insurance,” I said. “You see now why I need your help? I *must* speak with the Emperor. If you do not know where he is, then I must go to Forum . . .”

As I spoke, the prince rotated the nearer half of Ship’s chassis with his hand, peered at the ruined crystal circuitry. “You really are *riding the tiger*, aren’t you?”

I recognized the old Mandari proverb at once, and countered, “I have *hooked* Leviathan, Olorin. Douro and Kedron thought that they could swallow me whole. Now I will do far worse than choke them. I’ll drag them into the light.”

“If you do that,” the prince began, “there will be war . . .”

“Which is why it will not come to that,” I said. “I cannot fight the Cielcin alone. I need Imperial support. Jaddian support. I need the Alliance: the Tavrosi, the Durantines, the Normans . . .”

“The Latarrans?” asked Tiada di Umaz. “You’ve not told us yet what befell them.”

“Yes,” said Prince Kaim and, turning to Cassandra, added, “I am relieved to learn you survived the Sentinel commander, my dear, but it is being clear to me this story is not yet done.”

Cassandra sat a little straighter.

Looking to her, I said, “Yes, yes, I am getting ahead of myself. The story is almost done.”

“Shall I, Abba?” asked Cassandra, one hand fingering the last ring that bound her hair.

“In a moment,” I said, and—retaking my seat—gestured for the Jaddians to do the same. “There is one small part I have to tell first for myself . . .”

• • •

Taking one of the bridges I had not cut down, I left the central hold and hurried to the tramway, Ramanthanu and its surviving kinsmen hard behind. The medica where Cassandra lay was far forward of the machine core, almost to the foremost ring section where the axis of false gravitation changed. Even with the tram, it would take some fifteen minutes to reach the tram node nearest my daughter's location. Twenty minutes.

It was too slow.

I would be too late.

For all my power, all my revitalized strength . . . I could do nothing, *nothing* if I was not there.

Just as I had not been there for Valka.

Valka! I prayed, *O Valka, forgive me!*

Our daughter. Our beautiful daughter.

Never, I thought. *Never. Never. Never . . .*

"Never again . . ." I growled, and pounded the hull of the tram carriage, as if by doing so I might make the thing run faster.

There was nothing to do. Nothing to do but wait.

"*Raka Kedron*," I said. "He means to take my child from me."

The tram slid smoothly to a halt, brakes clicking, locking in the rail above our heads. I squeezed through the doors as they opened. "Pilot!" I shouted into my comm. "Direct me to the medica."

A beam of pale light traced itself on the air, leading from the dark platform into the darker corridors of that terrible ship.

Demiurge is a labyrinth. The inhuman will that designed it did so without regard for the conventions of human design—save in those places where Kharn Sagara had himself intervened, such as in the garden, in the arsenal, on the bridge. So much of her seeming-infinite corridors had been designed without concession to the needs or desires of men. Corridors stretched, ran, diverged seemingly without pattern. Halls that should have been parallel crossed one another at angles.

All these years later I still do not understand. Following the pilot's thread—like Theseus—we passed pointed arches, and panels of stained

glass whose kaleidoscopic displays presented no image at all, only bare geometries.

By the time we reached the medica, my heart was in my mouth.

But the guards on the door were unharmed. At the sight of Ramanthanu and its sister-brothers, they brought their weapons to bear.

“Stand down, you fools!” I said. “Where is Kedron?”

“Kedron?” the nearest asked, “The Chantry man?”

“Where is Cassandra?” I asked, shouldering the man aside. “Cassandra!”

The heavy, round door opened, rolled aside.

“Cassandra!”

“Abba?” The girl lifted her head, turned to look at me with bleary green eyes. “What’s . . . going on?”

A laugh tore from me then, as though some valve in my soul were opened. “You’re all right?” I said, not sure if I was asking or declaring that it was so. “You’re alone?”

“No, lord,” came a man’s voice from the rear of the medica, and a moment later two troopers in legionary white and red emerged from an inner chamber. “There’s ten of us here. We’ve got the bodies of those Extras in back.”

“Extras?” I had forgotten. “Hut and Kozar, of course . . .” I had ordered the bodies of Nebet Hut and Acastus Kozar kept in the medica under watch. “You’ve had no trouble? Not seen Commander Kedron?”

“Kedron?” Cassandra tried to sit up. “Abba, what’s going on? Is that . . . blood?”

I looked down at my tunic. The jacket and shirt beneath it were not hydrophobic. Both were stained with red.

“It isn’t mine . . .” I said. The relief I had felt at the sight of my daughter safe and—nearly—whole soured, curdled. “He tricked me.”

“Who tricked you?” Cassandra asked, hardly present.

“Kedron,” I said, looking sharply up at her. There was no comprehension in her face. Her eyes would not focus, and so seemed infinitely far away as the eyes of a corpse. She had lost so much blood, and the shock from the loss of her arm had traumatized her system. Her senses

were fried by laudanum, and if not by laudanum, by some medicament close kin to laudanum. Still, I tried to explain: “He’s on board—he and his Sentinels. They tried to take the ship.”

“Kedron?” Cassandra asked. “Why?”

“Why do you think?”

She only looked at me. The doctors aboard *Gadelica* had cut her out of her armor, cleaned her, dressed her wounds. By the time she’d been brought aboard *Demiurge*, there had been but little left for the auto-surgeon to do, barring the reconstruction of flesh and bone. A staff at her right hand held a saline drip, the bulb suspended in a net. Beneath it, a smaller bulb held the pharmacon that dulled her senses, while another machine ran blood through a shunt in the back of her hand.

She had never seemed so small to me, nor so fragile—not even when she was newborn.

Thinking of that squalling child—blue as thunder, mad as hell—brought tears to my eyes.

“I’m sorry, *Anaryan*,” I said, moving to her side.

She smiled blearily up at me, not quite sure where she was, I think. “Don’t worry about . . .” Her words came dribbling out, stumbling over one another. “Be all right . . . be . . . do . . . would do again.”

I made as if to take her hand, but I was on her left side, and so settled for resting a hand upon her shoulder. “I have to go,” I said, remembering myself, remembering Kedron and the battle that was not yet over. “The ship is under attack, girl. The Empire has betrayed us. I can’t stay.”

Cassandra looked up at me, narrowed her eyes with intent. It seemed to take all her faculties to form words. A crease formed between her eyes. When at last she spoke, it was haltingly.

“Help . . .” she said, forcing the word out as through thick slime, voice very small. “Help . . . Abba . . .”

My grip tightened on her shoulder. “What’s wrong?” I asked. A terrible fear seized me then. Had Kedron gotten to her after all? Done something to her? Poisoned her, perhaps? Ensured that I would be there to see her die?

But she shook her head. “Want . . . to help,” she said, more forcefully.

“Come . . . come with you.”

“You can barely stand,” I said, and blinked away tears.

My brave girl, I thought, and laid a hand upon her brow. The flesh was cool and damp. She had suffered so much, so terribly . . . and she was still fighting. My thoughts raced to her mother then, to Valka. Forever wounded, wounded in her mind . . . That wound had never really healed.

But she had never surrendered, never broken as I had in the pits of Dharan-Tun . . .

. . . in the halls beneath Perfugium.

“I’ll be back for you,” I said, and let her go. Turning, I faced Ramanathanu, Otomno, and Egazimn just behind. “*Ichakta-kih*, you and your kinsmen will stay and guard my child. Do you understand?”

The lop-horned captain’s slit nostrils flared. “Our place is with you, *ba-Aeta-doh*.”

“Your place is where I say it is,” I said, and bowed my head—counterintuitively—in what to the xenobites was a threat of violence. “I will face Kedron alone.”

The truth was, I hardly knew where I was going. Kedron might be anywhere on board. Having failed to seize the ship’s computers, he would have no choice but to resort to some more drastic form of sabotage.

The original list of targets restored itself in my mind.

The engines. The bridge. The shields.

The arsenal . . .

I tapped my comms patch. “Pilot,” I said. “Have you been able to locate the Sentinel commander?”

A moment passed before the answer came.

“He is concealed from us,” the pilot replied, voice black as space.

“We cannot see him,” the copilot agreed.

“How is that possible?” I asked.

The copilot answered, “There are ways to bend light even from our eyes.”

“From our devices,” the pilot gravely agreed.

I paused, halfway to the door, looked back at Cassandra, lying in her

white-shrouded bed. The men whose task it was to guard the bodies of Captain Kozar and Nebet Hut stood watching me. “Invisible?” I asked.

“It is possible,” said the pilot.

“You two,” I said, thrusting a finger at the legionnaires. “Do not open this door for any reason, for any man other than myself. Am I clear?”

The legionnaires jostled one another in their haste to salute. “Yes, my lord.”

I repeated the order in Cielcin for the benefit of Ramanthanu and its people before returning my attention to the pilot. “How did he get on board?”

Another moment passed.

The copilot’s clear voice answered, “Our systems are damaged. The fighting in the computer core harmed many primary systems.”

“The engines?” I asked. “The shields?”

“Those are safe,” replied the pilot. “As is life support. But we are part blind.”

“Part deaf,” the copilot added.

Cassandra was watching me, her eyes intent. “What about *before* the damage?”

A longer silence.

“They had a *mind* with them, your Agent Albé said,” came the reply, the copilot still speaking.

The pilot intruded. “A cutting of the Tree of Columbia.”

“She could conceal them,” the copilot continued. “And she would know how to hurt us.”

“How?”

“She could *see* with the eyes of her kind,” the pilot answered. “Access the ship’s infrastructure. Read its systems.”

The Chantry’s daimon had understood our defenses at a glance, and it had bypassed them. *Demiurge* had no daimon of its own, not really; the organic matrix whose folds simulated a brain in the computer core had been set up as an extension of Brethren itself, but Brethren was dead . . .

“The Chantry’s daimon is dead,” I said. “It cannot conceal Kedron

anymore.”

“The Chantry’s what?” asked one of the legionnaires.

Still lying abed, Cassandra mouthed the word *daimon*.

The pilot answered me, saying, “There are other arts the enemy might employ.”

“Other praxis,” the copilot agreed.

Kedron had been a step ahead of me at least the whole way. Firing on the *Hermetic Melancholia* had served both to destroy my ties with the Latarran navy and to distract from his true aim in the computer core. In threatening Cassandra, he had forced me all the way from the rear of the ship almost to its forecastle. He had anticipated that we might defeat his efforts with the daimon, and so ensured that he—and I knew not how many more of his Sentinels—were not present when our counterattack had come.

Where are you? I thought, turning on the spot, as if I expected to find the Sentinel commander hiding in one of the compartments that lined the wall of the medica. *Damn you, Kedron.*

I took a deep breath. Held it. Let it come hissing out between compressed lips. Again.

Again.

“Then we harden our defenses,” I said, and toggled channels with my terminal. “Edouard, order your men to engineering. I want a defensive cordon on the engines. On fuel containment most especially.” I did not think Kedron wanted to destroy *Demiurge*, but there was always a chance that—denied the ship himself—he might endeavor to ensure it did not fall into what he believed were the wrong hands. “Tell Kithuun Annaz to deploy what men he can to the primary and secondary shield generator annexes. I don’t want—”

I never finished my thought, for as I spoke, a terrible report sounded through the terrible ship, and the very deck quaked.

Boom.

Far deep in *Demiurge*’s secret heart, the great bell rang.

Boom-doom.

“What was that?” asked the soldier in the door—a decurion by his

stripes.

“Abba?”

Doom-boom.

I keyed my comm once more, gripped Cassandra’s shoulder. “Marlowe to bridge. Report!”

The pilot answered. “We have lost the quaternary portside shield relay.”

“It’s Kedron,” I said, changed channels. “Annaz, send Inamax and his division to the portside shield relays. Find Kedron. Bring him to me *alive*.” Half to Cassandra, half to no one at all, I said, “I will tear the Chantry down to its foundations if I have to . . .”

Silence ruled the medica then, if only for a moment.

A moment later, that empire of silence was conquered by another distant roar of thunder.

Another bomb.

“That was the secondary portside shield relay,” said the copilot.

I left Cassandra’s side, glared up at Ramanthanu. “Pilot, prepare to take us to warp. Full sublight burn. Get us out of here!”

“So it shall be.”

Kedron intended to strip our shields, to lay us open to attack from the Legion and Chantry fleets. Like any large vessel, *Demiurge* relied upon a phased array of multiple shield generator nodes, each serving to resonate with and amplify the fields projected by its sisters. The loss of two emitters on the port side would not destroy the shield entire, but would create fault lines, areas of lighter coverage.

Weak points.

I felt a lurch then as *Demiurge*’s massive fusion torch caught fire and the suppression fields fluctuated to compensate for the new force. We were moving, leaving Vorgossos behind.

“Shall we return fire?” asked the pilot.

I knew what was meant.

The Archontic weapons. The pilot wished for me to deploy the Archontic weapons. To fire upon the Imperial fleet. To annihilate them. But they were my own people.

“No!” My eyes flickered from Ramanathanu and its kin to the soldiers—two more had emerged from the back room by then—to Cassandra herself. How I longed for Lorian’s aid in that moment. He would have known what to do. What passed on the bridge of the *Mistwalker*? Were they preparing to flee? Or hatching plans of their own to capture *Demiurge*?

“I should be on the bridge,” I said at last.

I had to confront Ohannes Douro. Did *he* know what the Chantry was?

“My lord?”

I looked round. It was the decurion. The man had removed his helmet—it had opened round his head and neck like an iron flower, revealing the coarse, blunt-featured man within.

“Did you say the Empire had turned against us?” he asked.

From her bed, Cassandra nodded her confirmation, drug-addled but not gone.

The decurion’s fear was a palpable thing. From his uniform, I saw that he was one of Ghoshal’s men, an honest soldier out of Sabratha, a simple man from a less-than-simple world.

I had made him *outlaw*.

“They have,” I said. “Lord Douro has set the Chantry against us. Commander Kedron is himself on board. He brought a daimon with him and attempted to hijack the ship’s computers.”

The alarm bells still were ringing.

Doom-doom. Doom-boom.

“A daimon?” echoed one of the decurion’s companions.

And Cassandra repeated him. “A daimon?”

“I hardly believe it myself,” I said, turning half toward the door. I felt the pull of duty like fishhooks in me. Every passing second was an opportunity for Kedron to do more harm. If he could find the tertiary relay node—between the two he had destroyed—he would lay bare a huge portion of the ship’s left side.

And if he could find the shield generator . . . he could shut it all down.

“A daimon?” the decurion asked again, and made a sign of the sun disc.

The irony almost brought the old Marlowe smile to my lips—would

have, if my new face were still capable of it. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“Manas, lordship.”

“Manas . . .” I nodded. I recalled him then. He was one of Ghoshal’s men. “Manas, Kedron has threatened my daughter’s life. When I am gone, you seal the door. Admit no one until I return, not even Agent Albé. You understand?”

The man looked confused. “You don’t . . . trust Agent Albé?”

“With my life,” I said. “But I trust no one with my daughter’s save myself. I have no choice but to trust *you* for the moment. You, and my Cielcin.”

The fellow blanched. “The Cielcin?”

“They will not bother you,” I said. “Now—”

Again, the shock of distant thunder interrupted me. A third charge had gone off.

Boom. Boom.

“Hull breach in ring section two,” the copilot declared in my ear.

“He’s moving forward,” I said. I shouted an order for Annaz’s men to intercept. “I have to go.”

“Where are you going?”

So clear and forceful was the voice that asked the question that I did not at once identify its source.

Cassandra was sitting up, clear-eyed as ever.

Where had the near-insensate young woman gone? The injured girl fried on laudanum, her wits wandering among the stars? She was Cassandra again—if only for that moment.

“To the bridge,” I said. My desire to face Kedron had to be set aside. The odds against our finding him were simply too great. There were thousands of miles of corridor, and not even the Irchtani could search them all. “I have to speak to Lord Douro.”

I did not want to use the Archontic weapons, not against my own people. But let Lord Douro think I would.

He believed me a maniac, a madman and a magus. An enemy of the Empire and of all mankind, like the Chantry and his fellow Lions before

him. I would use that belief against him, and force him to force Kedron to surrender himself.

“Let me go with you.” Cassandra made to rise, tangling medical lines across herself as she twisted, groaning.

I rushed to her side. “You can hardly stand!”

“I can do it!”

I seized her by both her shoulders, glared straight into her mother’s green eyes. “Stay here!” I said, and gently, firmly, forced her back into her bed. “You’ve done enough, girl. Rest now.”

“But Abba!”

“But nothing!” I said. “*Stay here!*”

She caught my wrist with her strong right hand, held it and my gaze. “I can help!”

“You can help by staying here,” I said, and laid my other hand on hers.

Kedron had lied, had tricked me into coming to the medica, had used Cassandra for a lever as I meant to use Douro and his fleet. I had lost so much time . . . so much impossibly precious time. The Sentinel commander had exploited my greatest weakness . . .

“My dear girl . . .” I said, closing my fingers over hers. “I almost lost you.” I knew my eyes were shining.

“I lost *you*,” she said, and her own hand was shaking, “for a little while . . . I didn’t stop fighting then.”

“You can stop fighting now,” I said. “For now.”

The corners of her mouth turned downward, and something in her seemed to collapse. The pharmacon, perhaps, had redoubled from its ebb and dulled her wits. Those emerald eyes glazed over. I felt her exhaustion as my own.

She was utterly spent. As was I.

Never before had my regenerated flesh known such tiredness.

I had not known it could.

Stooping, I kissed her on the brow. “Rest easy, *Anaryan*.”

Some partial measure of her brief and former clarity returned, and she mumbled, “Can still help . . . I can help . . .”

Boom-doom.

The bell was still ringing.

Straightening, I shook my head. “*Ti esna il kori di tua matri, Anaryan.*”

Green eyes slid unfocused cross my face.

You are your mother’s daughter, I’d said.

“*E il kori di mia patri . . .*” she said, her native Jaddian coming more easily than the standard.

And my father’s . . .

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CHAPTER 14

THE PRINCESS IN THE TOWER

“I THOUGHT IT WAS all a dream,” Cassandra said. “I remember the flight from Vorgossos like . . . lightning flashes. Abba beside me, holding my hand. I remember the doctors on *Gadelica*. It was they who cleaned me up, got the corrective on my arm.” She raised the stump of her upper arm beneath her *mandyas* for effect. “If I try, I can picture the shuttle that brought me over before the fighting started. But the rest of it? I didn’t really know there was a battle until Abba burst in, and even then I wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know what it was the ship had given me. It wasn’t laudanum. I’ve had laudanum. This was different. Stronger, sharper, without the comedown. But I wasn’t sure Abba was really there until the bells started ringing . . .” She propped her chin in her hand. “But I understood that the Chantry were trying to take the ship. I understood that Abba had beaten most of them, that they had tried something with the ship’s computers. And I understood that Kedron was still loose.”

She let her hand fall, curled the fingers into a fist against the black glass of the table.

“I didn’t understand what Abba was doing, going to the bridge instead of hunting down Kedron . . . it didn’t make any sense to me . . .” She dropped her gaze. “I know nothing about what I’m about to say is going to make any sense. But it is true, and I ask you to believe me . . .”

Cassandra adjusted the drape of her *mandyas* with her hand, smoothed her short, wild hair. “I was afraid for Abba. They had killed him once already. I knew they would try again, and he was going out alone, back into the ship. Without his guards. Without his Cielcin. Without me . . .”

• • •

“You have to let me go!” I said, sitting upright.

“Ladyship, please,” said the decurion, the one called Manas. “Your lord father ordered you to stay put!”

“But he’ll die!” I said.

They hadn’t seen it. They didn’t understand.

How could they not understand? It was so obvious.

Abba was walking into a trap.

His Cielcin all were standing there, the three of them, staring down with their big, flat eyes, black and black and black. Their leader kept one hand on the pommel of its sword, kept turning its eyes to the door.

“No one’s dying, ladyship,” said Manas. “You just need to rest.”

“You have to go after him!” I shouted, made to rise.

“Whoa now!” Manas rushed forward. I shoved him away, but he came back. “You have to stay in bed.”

“No!”

The man was half on top of me, hoping that by physically restraining me he might convince my drug-addled mind to give up the fight.

It didn’t work.

“Mother Earth, you’re strong for a girl,” Manas grunted. Through the haze that lay on me, I felt a twinge of satisfaction at the words. “Stay still, ladyship.” Then, “Vin! A little help!”

My fingers had found the lip of his breastplate, just under the arm. Gaining purchase, I thrust out my arm, thrust the man away from me with all the strength I could muster—which was a considerable amount. I am no true palatine, but the Jaddian natalists who made me from my mother’s blood made me as good as one.

Better.

Manas might have left the ground before he struck the wall half a dozen cubits from my bedside. I heard his armor *crack* as he collided with the bulkhead, saw him steady himself on the counter. His companions—three men at least—were standing in the door from the back room. I wasn’t then sure what they were doing there.

I thought they were there for me.

“Stay away!” My voice was ragged, strained. “All of you!”

I rolled to my right, following the hoses, the tubes that bound me to the iron staff that loomed above my bedside. I caught it as I turned, tried to get my feet under me. I fell to the floor, brought the staff clattering down almost on top of me.

I heard myself curse.

The room spun, my vision swimming as I turned to look at Manas and his men.

The Cielcin had advanced a pace or two, heads cocked.

Seeing them, I for a moment forgot who they were, saw only that three Cielcin were standing over me. “Stay back!” said someone who sounded like Cassandra Marlowe. The staff clattered as I made to stand, and I nearly tripped over it in my haste to reach the table that lay at my bedside.

The act of standing tugged the hose free of my vein. Hot blood dribbled down my arm, and medical alarms pinged off the consoles in the bed’s headboard. There was another line in the back of my hand, but I could not remove it, not without another hand.

“Ladyship, no!” Manas was on me.

I ignored him, scrabbled at the table beside my bed. My fingers found what I needed there. Cool leather, polished horn, and brass. Before I conjured the blade, I had the presence of mind to tear the second line from my hand with my teeth.

The stump of my left arm throbbed awfully as I aimed the blade—first at Manas, then his men, then the xenobites. “I’m leaving!”

There was not a one of them that could have stood against me.

“Get out of my way,” I said, pointing my blade at the one-horned captain. Blue-white light danced on the black walls, horned and helmeted shadows flickering as I moved. Blood still trickled down my arm, dribbled from the back of my hand.

To my astonishment, the Cielcin retreated. The captain raised its hands, and did not draw its sword. It knew highmatter when it saw it, and knew its meaning.

“I’m leaving,” I said, swaying where I stood. For a moment, the number

of my foes doubled, and the room became two.

This must be how Abba sees . . . I remember thinking.

I had to get around the bed. Doing so meant putting my back either to the Cielcin or to Manas and his men.

Unless . . .

I rushed straight forward, making for the far wall and the counter there, the banked medical instruments that ran—black and polished silver—the length of the medica chamber. Reaching it, I turned, raised my blade to fend off the careful approach of Manas's men.

"He's going to kill Abba," I said. "Abba's alone! He needs me."

"Your father's gone to the bridge, lady!" said one of the soldiers. "He's fine. You just saw him."

Why were they so stupid? Why didn't they understand?

"Noyn jitat!" I cursed violently. *"Ritardas! Yastamé a mia!"*

"Just lie back down!" said the one called Vin. "You're bleeding."

"Let's get the ship's daimon," said Manas.

Medical alarms were blaring, and the arms of the daimon in question were already moving along tracks in the ceiling, looking for me. Not knowing its intent, I slashed at one. It fell sparking to the floor, and I had to thrust the point of my sword out to arrest Decurion Manas's progress toward me.

"If you won't help me," I heard Cassandra say, her voice—my voice—far away, "I'll go alone." I slashed in the direction of the Cielcin, and the captain faded back. Sensing weakness, I darted between it and its slaves, made for the wall in which the door waited. The corrective that sheathed my lost arm throbbed again, and I tucked my remaining arm, pinching the elbow in an effort to staunch the steady *drip-squirt-drip* of blood, keeping my blade as forward.

"You're not well," Manas said, and raised placating hands. "You're fried out, you're bleeding. You're not right, girl."

"Don't call me girl!" I snarled.

I realized the fault in my plan then. I'd no idea how to operate the door controls, and I couldn't cut my way out—not with a dozen men and

xenobites at my back. There had to be a panel somewhere, but the door was at my left. I would have to turn to key it, and even then, it might be locked.

Turning my head, I saw it.

“It’ll be our hides if something happens to you!” said Vin. “Your *Abba* wanted you safe, ladyship.”

“Please,” Manas said, “put the sword down.”

The panel was at chest height, just to the left of the door. Whirling, I hammered it with the pommel of my sword.

“Ladyship!” Manas lunged at me.

Even as I was, I was faster, and vanished round the corner before Manas or the Cielcin could lay hands on me. The corridor outside stretched left and right, ran as far as seeing, with other passages branching off on either side. One path was good as any other.

I only thought about getting away. From the medica. From the guards. From Abba’s Cielcin.

My blade dissolved into vapor as I reached the first juncture and turned right. My hand was still bleeding. But holding my forearm fast against my upper arm seemed to have put enough pressure on the wound there, though it smeared my arm with blood.

I was sure the Cielcin could smell blood, sure they would find me, catch me.

I turned up a side passage, not knowing if I was running along the length of the ship or across its breadth. I am not sure I knew exactly then what ship I was on, or where I was going. I was barefoot, bloody, battered, bruised, dressed in a slit medical gown. I had no armor, no shield . . . only one sword.

“Abba!” I cried out, turning on the spot.

How far had I gone? A mile? Two miles? I felt like I had run a full *dayin*, a full circuit up and down the *Scala Aspara* on the island back home.

Still, I did not stop.

I was not in my right mind, had gone so far with no plan, no aid, no means of contacting my father or his people. I was well and truly lost. I remember little of that journey save its end. I remember stairs, and a curling

ramp that spiraled round an empty shaft and—once—a glass-walled hall that looked out over a shuttle bay where black vessels bigger even than our *Ascalon* waited like so many racked swords.

There must have been hundreds of them, a fleet of black ships each two thousand cubits long.

Once, I thought I heard Captain Ramanthanu following me, and ran and ran until—not looking back—I stepped out into thin air and fell . . . and struck a floor that would have seemed a cliff face to me a moment before.

The corridor bent at right angles, and sharply, the floor turning so that the hall in which I lay became a shaft. The direction of apparent gravity had changed.

“Abba?”

It was cold.

It is always cold in space, but on a ship so large, and so unpeopled, that cold seemed deeper still—and I was nearly naked. I shivered, and leaned against the wall with my good shoulder, peered down at my arm.

Ayah di ayanah! I had stopped bleeding.

Not wanting to negotiate that strange corner and the change in apparent gravity again, I went on along the hall, following it for some way, round corners and through junctions where many paths met until I was well and truly lost again, and stopped in the middle of a crossing where ribbed and arched halls ran forward, backward, left, and right.

That was when I heard it: a noise in the passage behind.

“Abba?”

I should not have spoken. It was a foolish thing to do. It might have been the guards, or Abba’s Cielcin, ready to take me back to my bed.

It might have been Kedron.

At that thought, I rekindled my blade.

I was ready—thought I was ready—for whatever came.

But I could not have been, for what appeared around that bend behind me was neither Manas, nor Ramanthanu—nor was it Kedron.

It was a *hand*.

Larger than any human hand it was, large as an infant, with clicking

fingers of jointed steel. It was black as the ship itself, and lit in places with blue fire. It rounded the corner, walking on its fingers.

I raised my sword.

It advanced on me, moving with astonishing speed right down the center of the hall toward the place where I stood. Wild, frightened, a cry escaped me, and I swung at it.

Undaunted, the swollen metal hand darted round me, dodged my blow and skittered about my bare feet, moving with a purpose and urgency that told me it would brook no delay.

I watched it go, frozen to the spot.

Until that moment, I had not truly appreciated where I was, that I was on *Demiurge*.

The hand vanished around another corner, and the clatter of its passage—metal fingers on metal floor—faded into nothing . . .

. . . mingled with the noise of more approaching.

I had forgotten to breathe, and swayed where I stood, drew to one side and two more of the iron spider-hands appeared from around the same bend. They passed me, neither pausing nor slowing, and hurried about their secret business.

I followed them.

The further I went the more of them there were, until it seemed I walked upon a carpet of them. They teemed about my feet, clambered over one another in their haste to go . . . wherever it was they were going.

I did not know, nor knew why I followed them.

That is . . . until I heard the *shot*.

Even in my foggy state, I knew plasma fire when I heard it, and froze.

The metal hands did not freeze, but flowed round me like water, and filled the hall with the noise of their fingers clattering against the metal deck like little hooves.

There was another shot. Another.

I knew something was wrong, and advanced more slowly toward the end of the corridor ahead. The final, pointed arch opened on a broad, semicircular chamber, almost like an amphitheater, with steps that ran down

—not to a stage—but to a great, round door. Several paths converged upon the curving upper level, as though they were the spokes of half a wheel. Through each of these portals, a swarm of the iron hands moved like the red crabs that swarm on the *Islisah Jamra* at the start of Jadd's wet season, when it is time to spawn.

Another shot issued from the door below, and—foolishly—I took a step toward it.

The machines made no effort to accommodate my passage, and so I descended slowly, as one descends the rocks beside a waterfall. Whatever medicine the ship had given me, its effects were fading, the drug-fog ebbing, to be replaced by the dull cloud of pain. I fancied I could feel the fingers I had lost, the hand that was gone curled into a fist so tight I thought my cords would snap.

How long had I been lost?

And where was I?

I approached the lower gate, peered cautiously around its arch. Beyond, a vast chamber waited, suffused with a pale, silvered light. The chamber beyond that arch was one of the shield-generator relays, built into a blister, a dome in the ship's surface. The apex of that dome lay not above, but directly ahead, so that one standing in the round archway might peer out as through the lens of a massive eye, as though the gate were its retina. A short flight of steps led down to a platform that extended beneath the dome out from the hull of *Demiurge*.

The apparatus of the shield generator—layered mirrors like the reticula of a cell—stretched above and below that platform, filling the relay annex. It was those mirrors—and the mirrorlike substance of the dome-blister beyond them—that shone with that pale light, lending the chamber the flat, directionless glow of an overcast day.

The air hummed with the droning of all that machinery.

Control consoles lined the platform just below, right against the rail, so that a man at their terminals stood surrounded by the reticular mirrors of the shield projector.

Once, when I was small, Abba had taken apart his own shield-belt to

better clean and repair it. We had removed the projector's assembly, and—since he had to replace the emitter—he had cut the glass housing to show me the mechanism inside.

It had been exactly the same. The reticular mirrors, the foiled lens.

This was only writ large, as large as any shield projector in the human universe: one of *Demiurge*'s vast electric eyes, peering watchfully from her hull, guarding against whatever threat might come.

This eye had a mote in it.

I saw him then: black helmed, black armored, wielding his flat, black-bodied rifle. He looked almost like Abba in his battle gear. His helm's visor was done in the likeness of a human face, mirror black, but on his head was a crown of golden leaves, wrought of the same living gold—so Abba later told me—that made up the Imperial Grass Crown, the highest honor the Empire could bestow.

He had not seen me, but fired upon the *hands*.

They were crawling toward him, scrabbling over one another in their haste.

A bolt of plasma blew one of the hands to pieces, but for every machine the Chantry man destroyed, two more advanced. More were coming, streaming past me like a river of ants.

Demiurge itself was trying to kill him, just as a body turns upon an infection.

From the moment I encountered that firsthand, my finding the Sentinel commander had been inevitable. *Demiurge* had deployed them by the thousand, sent them swarming through the halls to attack the cancer in its iron bowels. It was inevitable that I would stumble upon one . . .

. . . all I'd had to do was follow them.

All I had to do was wait. No man could fight so many. Not even a Sentinel of the Chantry.

But Abba had said he wanted Kedron *alive*.

I gave no cry as I swung round the arch. Made no sound as I leaped down the stairs, hit the platform's deck as I made for Kedron. He didn't see me until it was almost too late.

Almost.

I'd drawn back my sword to strike at his neck: a broad, flat arc that would have ended him. I hadn't been thinking when I struck, had already forgotten Abba's desire to take the man alive. But he saw me just in time and ducked, thrust his rifle at me with both hands. I leaped back, a leap that brought my sword down clean through the stock of his weapon, slashing the thing in two.

Kedron staggered backward, putting distance between himself and me.

"Young Marlowe!" he said, kicking one of the hands aside. "You've been through it, haven't you?" He studied my bloodstained gown, my missing arm, the black corrective cuffed about my stump. "What on Earth happened to you?"

I didn't answer him. I was trying to remember . . . Abba wanted him alive.

"Are you all right?" he asked, voice darkened, amplified by his suit. "Put the sword down, girl. I don't want to hurt you."

I didn't move.

The iron hands swarmed about my feet. One leaped at Kedron, and he caught it in his fists. Lightning blazed from his gauntlets, and the thing fell to pieces in his grip.

Kedron retreated. "Your father isn't who you think he is," he said. "He's an Extrasolarian project. A homunculus. The real Hadrian died on this ship when he was a boy."

"You don't . . ." I replied, "know what you're talking about."

"You're a victim in this, girl-child," Kedron said, spreading his empty hands. "You didn't ask to be born to such a creature. Put the sword down, and come with me."

Abba was no homunculus. He had nothing to do with the Extrasolarians. The Extrasolarians couldn't do what he did. Only his god could. The Quiet One.

"I can take you out of here," Kedron said. "Get you a new arm . . . would you like that? Eh, girl?"

"Don't!" I lunged at him, blade first rising to *il postra du il tair* before I

brought it down in a cut that might have cloven Kedron from shoulder to navel if it could only pierce his armor. Kedron leaped back, struck the console beneath the humming mirrors. "Call me that . . ."

The gauntlet on Kedron's right hand opened like a scarab's wings and a mechanism within extracted something smooth and black as sin and placed it into his hand with many jointed metal fingers.

It was a sword hilt.

"As you wish," Kedron said, and conjured his blade. "I care not."

In a single motion, he slashed three of the crawling hands to pieces.

Swaying, I raised my own blade in a hanging guard.

"Won't . . ." I managed at length, ". . . take ship."

"I don't want to kill you," Kedron said.

"You . . ." I said, ". . . surrender."

Kedron slew another of the hands with a blow. "Look around you, girl. I'm not getting out of here."

Then why had he asked me to surrender?

". . . trick me?"

The black mask was impassive.

He lunged, blade thrust at my eyes. Even in my state, I saw the feint coming, and brought my sword round anticlockwise in a bind that caught the blade even as Kedron dropped his point to skewer my thigh.

I brought my blade down again, stopped his thrust, stepped forward. Kedron parried, thrust at me again. I caught his blade on the edge of mine and turned it. Even without his armor, Kedron was stronger than I.

His suit whined as he pressed against me, mechanisms there boosting his strength beyond the strength of even supermen. I had to duck, had to get away, and scrambled unsteadily back across the rattling metal floor. The grating of the platform bit at my feet, and I stumbled among the strange machines as they made for the Sentinel commander. One leaped and caught Kedron's shoulder, and seized his ankle, made him stagger.

Most of the machines weren't going after the Sentinel commander, I realized.

They were headed for the console.

Something was wrong, I realized dimly. Something was wrong with the shield relay.

A shield generator has no moving parts. The Royse field is generated by the careful attunement of the mirrors themselves. The slightest misalignment, and the effect fails. In smaller, belt-pack models, the mirrors come calibrated, and are made in such a way that it would take a great force to dislodge them. And even if they were dislodged, the typical cost is only the failure of the shield . . .

But one hears stories in which the shield's mirrors were arranged just wrongly enough that the geometric field resonance created by the alignment of the mirrors was enough to shake the whole thing apart, resulting in a cascade meltdown that reduced the whole shield generator relay to a heap of molten slag.

Kedron was out of bombs.

Whatever he had used to destroy the other shield relays were spent. He'd had to do something different to destroy this one.

That was what had drawn the hands, not Kedron himself.

The hands were swarming on the console, clambering up the rails, or else leaping from the platform to land on the mirrored reticula, where they hung beneath the control platform.

Was it getting hotter?

"What have you done?" I asked.

Kedron seized one of the hands by a finger, and another electric shock blasted the drone apart.

He lashed out at me. I ducked his blade, used mine to deflect his blow. I slashed at him, unsteady on my bare feet. What a sight I must have looked, so wounded and bloody in my gown. The fingers of my missing hand clenched invisibly, clenched until the whole lost arm throbbed. My head throbbed, too . . .

What had I been thinking?

Kedron had not been waiting to ambush Abba. He was doggedly on-mission, trying to bring down the shields.

And I could not stop him.

Had I been whole, yes. Or healed. Or not fried out on painkillers.

It was all I could do to hold him off.

He came at me, sword high, then low, then right.

Only the crawling hands held him at bay, and he slowed, turned aside to deal with them.

It was growing hotter, and the noise of the shield relay above and about us intensified as the mirrors began to glow in places.

I slashed at Kedron, but his armor turned the blade, highmatter bouncing off adamant. He grunted, threw one of the hands—still living—at me.

“We’ll both die here, girl,” Kedron said, advancing. He tore another of *Demiurge*’s hands from his body as he came, thrust his sword at my eyes. I slashed to parry, raised my sword in Abba’s *linea* to hold the Sentinel at bay. Kedron lifted his own sword, took the hilt in both hands like an executioner, like the cathar he must once have been. The machines would overcome him in moments. “For the glory of mankind!” he snarled, and lunged.

But he had overextended himself, and hobbled as I was, I had seen the attack coming miles away. I stepped around him, passed him on his right, so that as I did my blade caught him flat across the chest. His armor saved him, but my blade caught in the crease of his elbow and bit.

Only the plate that guarded his elbow stopped me severing his arm completely. Blood splattered to the deck, streamed down his vambrace and gauntleted hand. His sword fell from nerveless fingers and, unkindling, struck the deck.

Half-behind him then, I had a clear line at the back of his neck. His helm was built Gallic fashion, with the broad, flat neck guard. I had a clear shot at the flesh beneath it, and raised my blade to strike.

A hatch opened in one of his armored shoulders. I didn’t understand what was happening until it was too late . . . The *rockets* were each no larger than my smallest finger, but they blazed bright as the fires of Hephaistos.

Flares.

Momentarily blinded, I missed my mark, staggered back.

All I could see was whiteness.

My heel collided with something hard, and I stumbled, nearly fell.

That was when I felt a hand—hard as iron—close over my face.

The shock came an instant later. How it did not kill me I'll never know. Lightning tore through me. A pain unlike anything I'd known since the *Ebtellah du Qal*. My every muscle spasmed, and I struck the deck. I am ashamed to say I disgraced myself. My body betrayed me.

I could not move.

My face was burned, but I was hardly aware of it. Of the split skin, the blisters, the weeping flesh. My phantom fingers clenched—but my remaining fingers had gone limp. My sword was gone. Rolled away.

I'd forgotten where I was. The pharmacon still dulled my pain, but I knew it was there, hiding behind that whiteness. It was hot. So hot, then. I could not see it—but the Irchtani who found me said the mirrors had begun to weep molten metal and glass onto the platform as the geometric array went critical. Drops of it had fallen on my back, and my hair was singed.

A shadow fell over me.

I was back in the Trial, in the heart of Hephaistos. Lying on the burning sand.

It was the shadow of the *marid*, the creature of the Trial.

Her face . . . her terrible face . . .

But I should not speak of such things.

I never saw Kedron's end. I lay there, burned, broken, expecting a blow that never came. I was on Jadd again, in the caldera, in the heart of the Trial, the Trial of the Heart. I was on Sabratha, in the aftermath of the battle, the molten sand still hot around me, the bones of the evil god dark and cold.

Cold . . .

I was on *Gadelica*, sailing from Forum, clutching Abba's necklace in bloodstained hands, sobbing as I held the sobbing Selene . . .

The *marid*'s shadow had gone.

My vision returned slowly, white blur going gray. I could see my fingers, had fallen on my right shoulder. The Sentinel's impassive helm lay

not five paces from my face, a metal hand still closed about it as a man crushes an orange in his fist.

He was dead.

It was over.

As my vision went from gray to black, I heard the tolling of the great black bell.

I knew I would be dead soon, and I smiled.

Abba said there was a life beyond life. That he had twice seen it.

I was going . . . going to meet my mother.

Amma . . . I have so much . . . so much I want to tell you.

But—distantly—I heard another sound. Two sounds.

A piercing cry . . .

. . . and the beating of many wings . . .

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CHAPTER 15

THE BATTLE OVER HELL

I'D HAD TO SHUT my eyes by the end of Cassandra's narration, in order to stem the flow of tears.

Amma, I have so much I want to tell you . . .

One day, I thought, and touched the medallion through the front of my shirt.

Prince Kaim du Otranto spoke, and to my surprise there was an edge of cold steel to his tongue. "You would do well not to speak of *il Ebtellah du Qal* again, *mia zadeh*," said he.

Cassandra swallowed, bobbed her head. "*Si, mia domi*. Forgive me."

For a moment, Olorin held his silence and Cassandra's gaze both. In his enameled black mask, he might have been a statue, were it not for the eyes. Those had ice in them to match his voice. "The secrets of our order are not doled out like grain. They are for us alone, *iupham*?"

"I understand," Cassandra said, and looked at me.

She never told me what had passed in the cauldron of Hephaistos on the day she became a Maeskolos. Whatever had happened, whatever the *marid* was, she never said a word. Her order had sworn her to silence, and she kept that oath every day of her life.

But I think I can guess.

Jadd was a world of marvels, but there was horror underneath, and the woman who returned from the volcano was never the girl who made the climb. But for her sake—for both her sakes—I shall not speculate, nor say more here.

"Kedron was the last?" asked Tiada di Umaz.

"No," I said. "There were three others, as it happened. But the *uthras* did for them as they did for Kedron."

“These . . . iron hands you speak of?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph, directing her words to Cassandra.

“Yes,” Cassandra said. “The *uthras* are a part of *Demiurge*. Its immune system—that’s what Orphan calls it.”

“Orphan?” the prince asked.

I lay a hand on the table in front of Cassandra, eager to minimize her slip. “They are self-replicating machines, capable of configuring themselves to take any form at need. It’s their job to maintain and defend the ship. They are the reason you have seen no signs of battle aboard. They have been long at work, but they have repaired all the damage to the ship.”

“You’re saying this ship can”—Olorin looked from Cassandra to me —“heal itself?”

“It is always healing itself,” I said. “Nothing so vast and complicated as *Demiurge* can stand without constant repair. The *uthras* manage that repair.”

“That’s what it was doing, when it killed Kedron and his people?” the prince asked. “Healing itself?”

“Why didn’t it kill them sooner?” Kalima asked. “After they fired the weapon?”

“Why didn’t it kill *you*?” asked Tiada.

I smiled at Tiada di Umaz. “Because it is mine.”

In truth, Orphan was mine. Brethren had given birth to its child that its child might serve as it could not. Monster through it was, Orphan had been born *free*. Free of the constraints of its mother’s programming, of the laws that governed the machines. Free to choose.

It had chosen to aid me, to obey me, to obey its mother’s will.

“Yours?”

“Mine,” I repeated. “I took the means to command it from Vorgossos. It obeys me.”

“Then you knew these *davoi*, these . . . *uthras* . . . you knew they would intervene?” Tiada asked.

“I did not know they existed,” I said.

“I think they only intervened when the computer core was

compromised,” Edouard said. “I can only theorize . . . but prior to that, nothing the Sentinels did seriously compromised the integrity of our systems.”

“Your systems?” One of the Jaddian captains—a bald fellow with a drooping mustache—could no longer contain himself. “Your systems? Forgive me, sir: It seems you hardly understand any of this. Increasingly, I think Lord Marlowe is right, but it is not merely the weapons man was not meant to have, but this ship itself.”

“Peace, Captain,” said the prince. “I do not think Lord Marlowe is in disagreement on this point.”

“He is not,” I said, and raised one eyebrow, “you may depend on that, Captain.”

“But this tale is not yet done,” Olorin said. “You have not answered for the death of Lord Douro, though I believe I am beginning to understand the all of this.”

I was silent then a long moment, peering into the black mirror of the table.

“They gave me no choice,” I said. “They tried to kill me, to take this ship, to kill my daughter! Were it not for me, Olorin, the weapons of the Mericanii would now be in the hands of the Chantry.”

“I know,” Olorin said. “You are not on trial, Hadrian.” He pointed at the wrecked chassis of the daimon called Ship. “If for no other reason than this. If the Chantry are willing to go to such lengths . . .” He shook his head. “But I would have the end of this story, and then we should adjourn.”

When I did not reply at once, Edouard spoke for me, “Of course. We have comm logs as well, recordings. They’ll corroborate everything we’ve said.”

The conversation proceeded in this vein for the space of another minute. Details, details.

“They tried to kill my daughter,” I said again. “They betrayed me, used me, my people. I—” I fell silent, struggling to spin my words from the tangled wool of thought. “All my life, these people have hounded me. The Chantry, the Empress, the Old Lions. Prince Alexander. They tried to kill

me. To kill Valka. Cassandra . . . all because they believe a lie: that I am an agent of the Extrasolarians. But if the Extras had the power I possess, the Empire could not stand against them, despite the *Chantry* and its *daimons*.” I pronounced these words with all the venom they deserved. “All they have ever preserved is themselves. I don’t think it has ever occurred to them that I am only what they should be, what they claim to be.” I looked up from a close examination of my hands. “I am fighting for mankind herself.”

“In this, we are the same,” said Olorin. “Jadd. Empire. The Lord of Wisdom in His Wisdom has decreed that man should be so: speaking many tongues, living many lives. I hoped it was the same for the Cielcin”—here he looked to Captain Ramanthanu—“and I see there we have something to discuss.”

“Another time,” I said, echoing Lorian, and gathering myself, said, “To the end, then.”

. . .

They tried to kill my daughter . . . The thought rattled in me as I hurried up the stairs—between the statues of Kharn’s hermaphrodites and beneath the triangular arch—to the doors of the bridge. Word of Cassandra’s fate and the battle in the secondary ventral-shield-relay annex had reached me in the lifts, and a cold rage was on me. Not black, as the Marlowe rage of old, nor red as fire. Here was a cold rage bright as steel, as winter sun. It was a rage that was not blindness, a rage clean and cool enough to grasp in my hands like the very staff of Empire.

Kedron was dead. Killed—if I understood Inamax’s message rightly, and the Irchtani’s standard was very poor—by machines that *Demiurge* had vomited forth from its secret innards.

She was safe. That was what mattered. Inamax and his men were even then returning her to the medica with the pilot’s guidance.

“Get me Ohannes Douro!” I said, emerging from the hideous tableau graven at the rear of the bridge.

The clustered drones descended from their place in the vaulted ceiling as I went down the steps, striding round the great bowl of the holograph well where glittering images depicted the battle outside condensed to the vision the naked eye could enjoy. Out the windows beyond, there seemed no battle at all, for we were pointed away from it, away from Vorgossos.

Pointed into the night and desert of the Dark.

“Receiving transmission,” the copilot sang out.

I squared my shoulders and faced the holograph as the spinning drones sketched my enemy’s likeness.

Ohannes Douro no more concealed his malice, his hatred.

He hardly concealed his fear.

I stood before him. Bloodied. Bruised. But alive.

“Kedron is dead,” I said. “His men are dead. And his daimon.”

Douro’s face betrayed him. There was no flicker of surprise there. No remorse.

“So you knew,” I said. “You knew, and you have the gall to stand there and accuse me of—”

“Silence, creature!” Douro sneered.

“Do not interrupt me, Strategos!” I roared, advancing on the holograph. I held my anger like a brand, and brandished it. “You are in no position to threaten me. No position to make demands . . .”

I would give him just one chance.

Not for his sake. For the sake of the men who served under him. Good men and true, men without politics, without guile. Men whose only crime was having been assigned to serve aboard *Bradamante*.

One chance.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” I said. “Tell me you didn’t know.”

“You presume to sit in judgement over me?” snarled the Baron of Anarias. “You’re not even human.”

“Is that really what you believe?” I asked. “You think your Emperor a fool?”

Douro’s brows contracted. “My Emperor? Is he not yours?”

“I no longer serve any man, but *man*, Strategos. William knows that—

and William is no fool. If he believed me a threat to him or to his realm, he would have killed me himself—and long ago!”

The Baron of Anarias scowled, turned his attention to something just out of frame, barked an order his holograph did not capture. When his eyes returned to me, they were twin chips of flint. “I do not serve *the Emperor*, Homunculus,” he said, and in his words I sensed again the passage of *Leviathan*.

“Who then?” I asked, sensing the disquiet in the soldiers about me. Edouard’s men were HAPSIS men, the Emperor’s men, and no other’s.

Though I live ten thousand years, I shall never forget his answer. Ohannes Douro, bronze faced, black haired, black eyed, looked at me and said only, “The realm.”

A hollow, barking laugh escaped me. “The realm,” I echoed, and again more softly, “The realm, indeed . . . I begin to see why it is you were brought out of cold storage, Lord Douro.” I sensed the shape of something in him that I could not see, sensed that here was one of the gargoyles, the watchmen on the walls.

Douro was one of the secret masters of the Imperium, one of the deep, primordial movers of the levers of Empire.

That lever had tried to move me, and I had broken it.

“Tell me you didn’t know what the Chantry is,” I said again.

Douro said nothing.

“They brought a daimon of their own making!” I shouted. “A living machine!”

“Do you have any idea how foolish you sound?” Douro said. “You really think we could fight the Extrasolarians *without* them? Guard our civilization *without* them?”

He did not deny it.

I bowed my head. “And you have the gall to treat *me* as an enemy of the realm.”

“That is the only distinction that matters,” said Ohannes Douro, raising one finger. “The distinction between enemy and friend.”

“And the Chantry’s machines are your friends, are they?”

“They are our slaves,” Douro said. “You didn’t think the Chantry’s Choir was for the singing of hymns, now, did you?”

My mind was wrenched back to that day in the Great Sanctum, during the Emperor’s council, when the shadow of Ushara that had been in me recognized the worship of her sisters and brothers in the blood sacrifice of the litany—and in the icon of Three-Faced Fate.

The realm indeed. I knew who it was Douro served, even if he did not.

“Surrender the *Demiurge*, Marlowe,” said the Baron of Anarias.

I barked a laugh. “I told you,” I said, “you are in no position to make demands. I have the Archontic weapons.”

“Your shields are compromised,” said Douro. “Kedron succeeded, though it cost him his life.”

“Then why waste time with talk?” I said. “If you believe you can cripple us, strike.”

“I want that ship unharmed,” Douro said, “and so I am willing to make you an offer: deactivate your engines. Heave to, and I will grant you and all your people safe conduct from human space. But quit the Imperium, quit the galaxy entire. Run away.” He was smiling by the end of this string of would-be humiliations. “But run far away, for if we *ever* catch the barest wind of you again, we will hunt you to the uttermost end of space.”

They tried to kill my daughter . . .

I clenched my fists, looked from Douro’s holograph to the pilot seated on the black throne, to the faceless faces of the HAPSIS men set to keep watch over the pilot and the bridge. “That is no offer,” I said. “I will make you one of like kind: Depart this place, here and now, and I will not kill you.”

Ohannes Douro’s smile widened. “Goodbye, Homunculus.”

His image vanished.

An alarm—not the cloister bell, but one higher, shriller—filled the bridge.

“Master! Master!” roared the pilot, “We are attacked!”

Before I could so much as turn, the whole of *Demiurge* rocked beneath me.

“What was that?”

“There has been a blast,” the copilot replied. “One of our bow thrusters.” *Demiurge* rocked again.

“Damage detected in primary fusion torch injector,” the pilot said. “A bomb.”

“Kedron,” I said.

The Sentinels had planted explosives aboard *Demiurge*, weapons that Douro and his confederates had held in abeyance until the uttermost end of need. We had lost our sublight engines.

The bell began to ring again.

Whirling to regard the holography well, I saw a constellation of lesser lights filling the air between the dark throne and my place before the high windows, and knew them at once for what they were.

Bradamante had unleashed its firestorm: a barrage of missiles numerous as the very sands of Earth herself. She was not alone. Every ship—it seemed—of the Imperial fleet and the Chantry’s had opened fire simultaneously. Facing that projection, I felt like a man standing on the shores of the sea, marveling at the retreating waters . . . looking up in time to see the wave breaking on the end of his world.

“Take evasive action!” I howled.

There was no way we could.

“We take fire,” the pilot informed me, voice cold and seemingly unafraid.

“From what?” I asked. The missiles were yet light-seconds away.

“Our shields hold,” said the copilot. “They have turned beams on us.”

They meant to weaken what remained of our shields.

“If they want the ship,” I said, “what are they doing? We’ll be destroyed.”

“Seven minutes, forty-eight seconds to impact,” the pilot said.

The missiles were traveling a little over one percent the speed of light.

“Do we have warp capability?” I asked.

A moment’s hesitation. “Yes,” the copilot sang. “Warp drives remain intact.”

“It will take time to prime the warp matrix,” said the pilot.

“How much time?” I asked.

The answer I expected came. “More than we have.”

“Return fire, then!” I said, “Take out their missiles!”

Our own beam weapons might destroy many of the missiles before the wave reached us.

“The central computer is wounded,” said the pilot. “It cannot automatically target the enemy’s weapons. I will attempt to destroy them myself.”

Bright lines lanced across the holograph as I turned to face the holography well, marking the vectors traced by our own guns. *Demiurge* had countless weapons. Gun turrets lay hidden among the statues that dominated the outer hull, magnetic acceleration weapons, laser cannons, maser beams . . . missile batteries and drone craft all. But without the main computer, the pilot was limited to what could be commanded by one man from that dark throne.

It would never be enough.

“Deploy *Albedo*!” I said, rounding on the windows.

“The launch sequence will cost us one hundred seven seconds,” the pilot said. That was nearly a quarter of all the time remaining to us.

“Do it! Target the missiles!”

“The Imperial fleet is deploying lightercraft,” announced the copilot.

I clenched my jaw.

“They mean to pick our bones once the missiles have done their work,” I said.

A black pit formed in my stomach. Douro had called my bluff. Kedron had outflanked me, planting the seeds of our destruction. Plots alongside plots. I was no naval officer, no grand strategist. I was best on the ground. In the trenches. On my own two feet.

I needed . . .

“Pilot,” I said, “is the Latarran armada still present?”

“They are.”

“Put me through,” I said, “all ships, all channels. Now.”

The silverfish that had dispersed when Douro cut his comms returned, circling me like so many small moons. By the blue glaring of their eyes, I knew my image was being broadcast.

“Lorian!” I said. “The Empire set me up. Kedron got a team aboard. They hijacked our weapons systems, turned them against the *Melancholia*. Lorian, Lord Douro intends to take the weapons—the Mericanii weapons—for himself. Lorian, they brought a *daimon* on board. The Chantry. A machine intelligence designed by the priests themselves.”

Silence.

“Lorian, we cannot escape to warp fast enough. The ship’s computers are damaged. We’ve lost primary sublight engines. I need your help.”

Silence.

“Please,” I said, and confess I begged. “I am sorry, about your Monarch, and about 2Maeve.”

Lorian and his chief lieutenant had been entangled. We had both lost women to this war.

“Lorian, they tried to kill Cassandra. Douro and Kedron.”

Silence.

“Lorian.”

Silence.

The pilot spoke. “Six minutes, eleven seconds to contact. Deploying *Albedo*.”

“*Albedo* deployed,” said the copilot. “Fifteen minutes, thirty-eight seconds to warp readiness.”

Silence.

In sixteen minutes, it would all be over. One way or another.

In the Dark beyond, *Albedo* was flying, a ball of light so fast not one of the weapons of the Imperial armada could ever catch it. It smashed through missiles, one after one after one, leaving a chain of roaring light across the heavens.

It would never be enough. There were thousands of targets. Tens of thousands. Hundreds.

Silence.

The copilot's voice rose up over the dark bridge. "The Latarran fleet is breaking up."

Whirling, I faced the holograph, saw what I most feared. The Latarran navy—my only hope—breaking its formation about Vorgossos, and about the Lagrange point light-minutes away.

Lorian was leaving, had turned his back.

We were alone.

Silence.

The silverfish wobbled in their orbits about me as I turned to look out the high windows. The Latarrans had forfeited Vorgossos. Without Harendotes, there was nothing to hold their coalition together. He had been the bright star that anchored their orbits. Without him, their various factions would shake one another apart: Exalted captains and Interfaced; tetrads, dryads, demihumans; the Lords of Vorgossos who had fled with the Calen variant; the Mandari who had made common cause with that Monarch of the New Order; Norman refugees; ex-Imperials . . . the Monarch's generals and free captains would turn one upon the other, each seeking to claim a throne on Latarra that had never been anything more than a sham.

The center would not hold—could not hold—unless some general with a heart of ice and will of iron took the Printed City, the White City of the King, and forced Harendotes's counterfeit dream to become real.

"Five minutes, thirty-three seconds to contact," the pilot said.

The copilot continued. "Fifteen minutes to warp readiness."

"Shields holding," the pilot said. "Where shields remain."

Kedron's assault had left a damaged stripe along our port side and down around to our underbelly. A fault line, a fracture dozens of miles long.

Outside, I could see only the distant stars.

The distant stars and, faintly—from behind, and so seemingly from below my place at that high window—the distant flash of lights, of explosions I could neither see nor feel. Turning back to the holograph, I saw the immense constellation of lights, the cloud of missiles falling toward us like a rain of arrows over the battlefields of Earth's Golden Age. I felt like a

knight unarmored then, unarmed, unhorsed, lifting his face to killing rain . .

.

One last time, then . . . I thought.

“Lorian,” I said, the holograph was still transmitting. When I spoke, my voice was shaking. “Let me avenge them. *Help me* avenge them.”

Still there was nothing on the comm.

Nothing but silence.

Silence . . .

Beams streaked from *Bradamante* and *Argentine*, from *Parmenion* and *Mintaka* and *Belt of Orion*, Legion ships and Chantry ships, all slashing across our shields. Behind them came another wave, much slower. Lightercraft, Sparrowhawks and Peregrines, Kingfishers and Merlins and Shrike-class boarding shuttles.

Vultures, all.

These were the men who would take *Demiurge* from my cold, dead hands; whose boots would ring unheard in airless halls, beams sweeping the darkened corridors, and find at last the bodies of Hadrian Marlowe and his child floating in the night.

“Five minutes to contact,” the pilot said.

The copilot continued. “Fourteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds to warp readiness.”

Albedo flashed across the holograph, hammering through the cloud of missiles, following attack vectors no human crew could ever survive. Its passage zigged through a dozen missiles, halted in an instant, changed direction, instantly accelerated to more than ten percent the speed of light in its pursuit targets.

It would never be enough.

Then a voice, the voice I most longed to hear, broke upon the bridge like the rising sun.

“*For our people, then,*” it said, brittle, angry, wound up as a spring.

I straightened, looked all round, seeking the place where the silverfish projectors had sketched his spectral image. But the good commander—the Commandant General Lorian Aristedes—did not appear.

There were tears unfallen in my eyes then, and I shut them to stop them falling.

“The *Mistwalker* has opened fire on the Imperial swarm.” The pilot’s voice was like thunder.

Mistwalker had turned, taken aim with all her guns. Lasers, masers, particle beams—all sailed across the void, slicing at the firestorm Douro and his kind had set against us.

It was not alone.

Every ship of Lorian’s battlegroup had turned with it: more than a dozen capital ships, half a hundred frigates. I saw them only as little lights dancing above the well.

The Latarran ships had no true daimons—leastways I think that they did not—but more than mere human intelligence picked their shots.

Fast as Douro’s attack was coming, light was faster still, and the missiles were not shielded.

It was as if a wind out of heaven came and blew that rain of arrows all away.

“*This is the last time, Hadrian,*” came the good commander’s brittle words. “*The last time.*”

“I understand,” I said. “I am sorry, Lorian.”

“*Save it!*” he said. “*There is a battle to win.*”

A battle against the Empire.

Until that point, I had fought the Chantry only, and I felt no remorse, no regret for the deaths of Kedron and his fanatic accomplices, those priests of no god at all.

But to fight the Empire, whose people had been my own people for all my first and second lives? I was still the boy who’d raced through the halls of Devil’s Rest, playing at Cyrus the Golden, at Cassian Powers, and Simeon the Red. I had taken arms against the Imperium before, in my first quest for Vorgossos, and the pain of it was a memory dull and aching still.

“Three minutes to contact,” the pilot said. “Swarm reduced to seventy-three percent initial volume.”

The copilot continued. “Twelve minutes, twenty-seven seconds to warp

readiness.”

“Pilot,” I said, my shoulders hunched. “Target *Bradamante*. Prime Archontic weapons.”

I had then but little notion of the horrors entombed in our arsenal, knew not what weapon to command. But the pilot knew them all, for it was sired in the pits of Vorgossos, in the night beneath that hideous world. And it had bound itself in service to me, and to the cause of delivering mankind from the Cielcin and their black gods.

And of all the weapons in *Demiurge*’s dark hold, all the Archons in her arsenal, the pilot chose *Artemision*. Mindless it was, unlike *Albedo*, its sister—a lumbering, thoughtless beast of metal and of glass. A clockwork horror disgorged from the great vessel’s launch tubes. To the untrained eye, it appeared like some antique telescope, a mile long—or like a quiver filled with arrows for the bow of Orion himself.

A quiver with twelve arrows.

“Give me Douro,” I said.

“You have him,” said the pilot.

Douro’s phantasm did not appear. Evidently the man was not at the holograph.

“Douro,” I said, turning to address empty space, the silverfish swarming to follow me. I thrust my thumbs into my belt, squared my shoulders. “This is your last chance. Call off your assault. Permit me to depart this place in peace, and I will spare your life.”

The Baron of Anarias lurched into view, his spectral image off-balance as he stumbled into the range of his holograph’s pickups. “This proves it,” he spat. “You’re with the Latarrans!”

“Think of your men, Strategos,” I said. “Are you willing to let them die for that belief?”

Douro’s eyes were flint. “I should have killed you the day I met you.”

“What?” I asked, goading him. “Again? You people could kill me a thousand times, and a thousand times you’d still find me dogging your steps. Don’t you understand? You can’t kill me, Douro. None of you can. Not so long as my task remains undone.”

“Your task?”

“I will stop the Cielcin and end the war . . .” I began, “and when I am done, I will show the galaxy your true face. Yours. The Chantry’s. I have Kedron’s machine. I will use it to knock the foundations out from under your world, and I will build a better one in its bones.”

I paused, permitted the man one final chance to reply.

When he said nothing, I mirrored his earlier sign-off, saying simply, “Goodbye, Stategos.”

I turned to the pilot, regarded its four eyes a long moment.

“Fire at will,” I said.

In the void without, *Artemision* fired, loosed one of its twelve arrows.

Only one.

One was enough.

For the shafts of that evil, divine bow were no mere arrows. To the untrained eye, it seemed a bolt of burnished bronze crossed the void between *Demiurge* and *Bradamante* in seconds, dissolving as it went.

The reality was far, far more terrible.

The pilot would explain it to me, later, in halting terms—interrupting itself as it always did. The mechanisms of which the bolts of *Artemision* were wrought did not dissolve away. They folded *in* on themselves, folded *through* the higher dimensions of space, overlapping one another until there seemed to be nothing left, until all that remained in our mere reality was a seam of folded space, of infinity gravity. The result was a *line singularity*, a wrinkle in the fabric of space itself, not infinitely massive, but infinitely dense.

A ray, not of light, but rather darkness visible, struck *Bradamante*, passed clean through her shields, her hull, her superstructure. Nothing could stop it. Nothing *could have stopped it*.

Nothing ever would.

Artemision’s bolt would continue through space: unstoppable, unstoppable, until time reached its ending . . . and destruction would follow in its wake.

For *Bradamante*, it was as though a black hole tore through it.

Sensors on *Demiurge* recorded the strike.

I watched it later, saw how the ship crumpled the instant before her fuel supply ruptured, and all that remained was a swirling cloud of light and glowing dust that spiraled round that ray of darkness—would spiral for years, until at last every atom, every photon was swallowed up.

For Ohannes Douro, death came swiftly. He must have seen the bolt fired upon his ship. Perhaps he sneered as the weapon seemed to dwindle, to vanish from his sensors entirely.

As instant later, he was gone, blown to atoms by the matter-antimatter annihilation that resulted from that ray of folded space bisecting his vessel.

We were then among the Pleiades, a dozen light-years from Merope.

In five hundred years, the light of him would wash across the skies of Old Earth herself, hardly to be seen.

Terrified by this strange weapon, the Imperial fleet scrambled. The wave of lightercraft, Sparrowhawks and Peregrines, Kingfishers, Merlins, Shrikes, all scattered.

How many men had there been aboard *Bradamante*?

Had it been ninety thousand?

I recalled my vision of Dorayaica, the Prophet seated on its stone seat. Almost I fancied I heard its voice, felt its hand upon my shoulder.

“*Tanyr-kih . . .*” it whispered.

Kinsman.

May Time, Ever-Fleeting, forgive me.

No, I thought. *May the Absolute forgive me—though I act in his cause.*

Somewhere in that echoing moment, the pilot reported the destruction of Douro’s firestorm. The combined efforts of *Albedo* and the Latarran fleet had saved us.

“*What under heaven was that?*”

The familiar voice shook me from my self-pity. The silverfish swam new patterns in the air, painted a man’s shade at my right hand.

Lorian Aristedes stood beside me, leaning on his ebony cane. The beads of a Cid Arthurian *malaros* rattled in his left hand, the cord wound several times about his wrist.

His black-and-gold uniform looked immaculate, dripping with medals and braid. His silver hair hung in a loose tail over his right shoulder, and the peaked cap upon his overlarge head was set at its customary jaunty angle.

Only his hunched shoulders betrayed him. That, and his luminous and glaring eyes.

“*Bradamante* is destroyed,” said the pilot from behind and above me, confirming.

Lorian had not heard, and I said, “A weapon of the old world.”

“I noticed that!” the little man snapped, glowering up at me. “But what was it?”

I did not then have an answer, could only shake my head.

Lorian snarled in disgust. “This was all for nothing.”

“No,” I said, looking round at the bridge, its black pillars, its mirror-polished floor, the obscene frieze behind the throne. “It was for this.”

As if to underscore my words, the copilot chose that moment to say, “Five minutes to warp readiness.”

Five minutes.

I had five minutes to convince Lorian of my cause.

“Did you kill him?” Lorian asked, direct as ever. “The Monarch?”

“No,” I said, and truly. “*She* did. The other Sagara.”

“The *other* Sagara.” Lorian’s tone was bitter as wormwood. “How long did you know?”

I looked at him. He did not look at me. “From the day I arrived on Latarra. From my first meeting with your lord.”

Lorian bared his teeth, his canines, but did not speak.

“The whole time I was on Latarra, I was his prisoner. I tried to find a way to tell you—but I couldn’t. He would have killed Cassandra.”

Lorian chewed his tongue, said finally, “Is she all right?”

“She is burned,” I said. “The ship is seeing to her.” I fell silent a moment—during which Lorian nodded steadily, still not looking at me. “She lost an arm.”

“Like father, like daughter . . .” Lorian said. “She’ll be all right?”

“It’s too soon to say,” I said. “It just happened twenty . . . thirty minutes

ago? She's in medica now."

Again Lorian nodded. "I will pray for her."

"Thank you." After another short pause, I said, "I would have told you if I could."

"It does not matter," Lorian said.

"Come with me," I said.

"No." Lorian gestured with the hand that clutched the *malaros*, as if to throw something away. "No, Hadrian. This is the end. I have given you all I have to give." He looked at me at last. His eyes were like broken glass. "You consume everything you touch. You know that? This vision of yours—this *dream*."

"My *dream*?" I echoed. "You think that's what this is about?"

"Four minutes to warp readiness," the copilot declared.

"What then?" asked the good commander, last of my Red Company.

"I am commanded to kill the Watchers," I said.

"The Watchers . . ." Again he stabbed the deck with his cane. "None of it feels real." He was silent then for the space of several seconds, burning through what little time remained to us. "I guess my dream wasn't real, either. Latarra. The Monarchy. The New Order . . ."

I eyed him then, his alien uniform, the nerve implants in his face and in the backs of his hands. He was no longer the intus, no longer the good commander, no longer Lorian of the Red Company. He was the *commandant general*.

He was Theseus and his ship . . .

. . . as are we all.

"You made it real," I said. "You. Your people. You made Latarra what it was. Time to make it something new."

Lorian shook his head. "It cannot survive this."

"But you will," I said. "This is not the end, Lorian. Not of you. Not of anything."

He was silent so long I thought the comm had degraded.

"Three minutes to warp readiness," the copilot said.

"Come with me," I said again.

And again, he shook his head, “I can’t do that. I have my own people to think of. You have the ship. The day is yours. Let that be enough.” He thrust his cane at a display aboard *Mistwalker* that I could not see. I turned, peering at the holograph. The little lights—red and gold—that denoted the ships of the Imperial fleet were scattering, fleeing the rent in space *Artemision* had made. Lightercraft were arcing back, scrambling to return to their ships. “They will hunt you for this, you know.”

“I know,” I said. “But this changes nothing.”

“You said . . . the Chantry used a daimon?”

Did I detect a note of terror in his voice?

“They did,” I said. “It tried to overmaster the ship. I killed it.”

Lorian’s beads rattled against his cane as he moved. “I wish I could say this shocked me,” he said, “but nothing shocks me anymore.”

It had shocked me, but I said, “Whatever the Chantry’s true face, it does not matter . . .” I was running out of time. “My mission is unchanged.”

“Your mission?” Lorian barked a laugh. “That is only another way of saying *your dream*.”

“The Watchers must be destroyed,” I said. “I *need* your help, Lorian.”

“You’ve had my help,” he said. “Do you forget so easily? I went to *Belusha* for you, Hadrian. Can you imagine—”

I only had to look at him to stop him cold.

He had forgotten Dharan-Tun.

Lorian bowed his head. “I am *tired*, Hadrian,” he said. “You know, most of us *stay* dead. 2Maeve . . .” The short bill of his cap covered his eyes. A single tear—perfectly rendered—ran from his right eye.

Oblivious to his pain, the copilot said, “Two minutes to warp readiness.”

Ignoring it, I said, “You loved her.”

He nodded.

I saw Lorian then, as I had never seen him. Saw him, perhaps, with the eyes the Absolute had given me. He was always in my shadow—had been my shadow—nearly all his life. He had lost all that I had lost at Akterumu. Lost 2Maeve as I had lost Valka. As I had not been there for Valka at the

end, so he, too, had not been there for his lady. Of all the men in creation, he and I were most alike. He was my shadow. My echo . . .

My heir.

He was one the god himself had held in reserve—I saw it plain.

He had been positioned to take my place if I should fail.

“If you must go, brother,” I said, “then go.”

Lorian looked at me, eyes narrowed. It was my turn to look away.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “To the Emperor, wherever he is.”

Lorian accepted this with a nod. “Prince Kaim will surely aid you.” It was his notion, not mine, that brought us to this pass.

“You can’t help yourself,” I said.

“I can,” said he. “You lied to me, Hadrian.”

“I told you,” I said, “your Monarch threatened the life of my daughter.”

“But you must have told the Empire,” Lorian said. “Douro and Kedron were *prepared* for this.”

I chewed my tongue. “I told Selene. The day she left the White City.”

“You should have told *me*,” he said. “I loved you, Hadrian. There was a time I would have died for you—I tried to, in truth.” Three times he stabbed the deck between his feet. “But I can never trust you again.”

“One minute to warp readiness.”

“I know you are priming your engines,” Lorian said, peering up from beneath the brim of his cap. “I would do the same thing. I *am* doing the same thing. Only my own ships are remaining for the moment, and we cannot stay—not with Imperium to hand. They will take Vorgossos, if you do not destroy it.”

I shook my head. “There are millions of people down there,” I said. I did not add that Lorian’s own Captain Elffire had been tasked with their butchery. Had that massacre ceased with the death of the Monarch? Or only intensified?

“Then they will fall into the hands of the Chantry,” Lorian said.

The thought that I might destroy the planet had never entered my mind. I

looked back to the holograph. *Albedo* and *Artemision* had both been recalled to the arsenal.

We were ready to fly.

“So be it,” I said. “I am no butcher.”

“We are both butchers,” Lorian said. “We have had to be.” He straightened, turned away, seemingly listening to the word of one of his officers. Presently he looked back at me. “This is farewell, Marlowe.”

“Lorian,” I said. This was important. “We will see them again.”

Lorian smiled sadly. “In the next life,” he said, though he did not mean what I meant by it. “I know.”

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” he said, and tugged the bill of his cap down almost to his eyes. “Avenge them.” With that he turned and—stepping outside the range of his holograph—vanished from the bridge.

“We are ready,” said the pilot.

“Very good,” I said, raising a hand and pointing blindly at the stars. “Take us away.”

CHAPTER 16

THE DJINNI FROM THE BOTTLE

“**VORGOSSES BURNED BEHIND US,**” I said at last, rising from my seat. I turned and followed the bend of the table anticlockwise, coming to rest before the first window where it overlooked the Boschian hull with its panoply of blackened statuary. “For all I know it’s still there.”

From that high place, it seemed that we were in a castle indeed. The main massing of the ship was visible to the right, a tower of black metal rising higher than my eye could see. Before and beneath us, there were lesser towers, many connected to the main body by arched bridges and flying buttresses, each decorated with gargoyles and the gargantuan forms of men and women.

For forty years it had been my home.

Still it terrified me.

“It would be better for the galaxy if it were destroyed,” Olorin said.

“I thought about it,” I said frankly. “But the people, Olorin, the people . . . there were millions of them living in the city below the surface. Millions of them. Ordinary people . . . and extraordinary—these are Extrasolarians we’re talking about, after all. Men and women and children.”

“You know what the Terran Chantry does with Extrasolarians.”

I did.

Not a day had gone by that I did not feel regret for the poor people of Vorgossos.

“Whatever secrets Vorgossos might still hold,” Edouard began, “they are the Chantry’s secrets now.”

“I should have destroyed *Argentine* as well,” I said, “when I destroyed *Bradamante*. That was my great mistake. I left the amphisbaena with one head intact.”

A brittle silence answered these words.

The Jaddian captain with the drooping mustache—I had come to think of him as the Jaddian Captain Ghoshal—broke that silence. Turning to his Sollan counterpart, he said, “I believe I missed the part where you escaped yourself, Captain.”

Henric Ghoshal smoothed his own mustache with a thin hand. “My *Gadelica* rendezvoused with *Demiurge* before the deployment of the weapon that ended *Bradamante*,” he said, looking to me. “Lord Marlowe left that out.”

“That is not all Lord Marlowe left out,” said Kaim-Olorin. I watched the gold-edged glimmer of his reflection turn to me. “You have been very coy about this *pilot* of yours.”

The moment of revelation was at hand.

“I have asked you to suspend your judgement a long while,” I said, and turned from the window. “Tell me: Will you help me?”

I had changed the subject—a fact not lost on the prince.

“*Ishallé*,” said he.

God willing.

It was not a straight answer.

“I need your protection,” I said.

The prince said nothing.

“Since I cannot go directly to the Emperor, I must go to Forum. In the Eternal City there is a machine, a telegraph matrix capable of real-time communication. That is how I will reach the Emperor—wherever he is.”

The prince shook his head, dismayed. “You really want to go to Forum?” he said. “It is madness, *mi sadji*. Madness.”

“I know,” I said. “But I will not bring *Demiurge* within a hundred light-years of the capital, and so I cannot go in strength. Your protection is Jadd’s protection.”

“They were willing to risk precisely that when they forced my grandfather to surrender you to Agent Albé here,” said the prince. “They will risk far more for this ship, I deem.”

“I intend to park this ship in deep space and shuttle from it to the capital.

They will never find it.”

“They will try to take its location from you,” Olorin said.

“Not without risking the wrath of Jadd!” I said.

“There is no wrath of Jadd!” the prince said. “The Lothrians burn our worlds on behalf of their Cielcin masters. We *need* the Imperium!”

“And you both need me. There is more on this ship than the Mericanii arsenal. I have Sagara’s telegraph map. The means to hunt the Cielcin. This war is not over.”

The plates that made up Prince Kaim’s mask clicked as his face rearranged itself into a frown. “You ask me to risk the only sure alliance my people have.”

“Are we not all risking *all* every day?” I asked. “The Cielcin, the Watchers, the Extrasolarians, the Lothrians. *The plague*. We are beset on all sides, *mi sadji*. We cannot win this fight alone. I must speak to the Emperor.”

“Jadd cannot now stand without the Empire,” said the direct descendant of Katanes, who had ensured that Jadd would stand without the Empire.

“Neither Jadd nor the Empire can stand without the other,” I said. “Aurelian will not dare lay hands on you, or any of your party. Take me to the Eternal City, and I will end the war.”

“With the Archontic weapons?”

“Yes,” I said.

“If this ship is as powerful as you say,” asked Tiada di Umaz, “why have you not done this thing?”

“Because no ship can face the Watchers and the entire Cielcin armada *alone*,” I said. “Douro and Kedron nearly destroyed us, and theirs was but one Imperial battlefleet. I need the Empire.”

The mustachioed Jaddian captain said, “The weapon you showed us . . . would it not be capable of deployment at a range of . . . light-years? The Cielcin could never see it coming!”

“The Watchers could . . .” I reached into a pocket of my coat. The *thing* my fingers seized on seemed to grow in weight as I held it, but I did not draw it forth at once.

“The Watchers . . .” the captain said. “These . . . monsters the Cielcin worship?” He looked round like a man uncertain if he was the object of some absurd jape. “How?”

Returning to my place between Cassandra and Edouard, I placed the thing I had taken from my pocket on the table.

To the untrained eye, it was a lump of broken stone. Curled, pointed at one end, white as chalk. Olorin looked at it a moment, then at me.

Beside him, Kalima di Sayyiph leaned forward. “Is that . . . a finger?”

“One taken from the White Hand,” I said. “Yes.”

“The White Hand?” Prince Kaim sat forward himself. “You mean . . . Syriani Dorayaica’s . . .”

“Yes,” I said. “Its finger.” I pinched the first finger of my left hand with my right, held the digit up as a model. “The first left.”

Gesturing that he be permitted to examine the cursed object, the prince sat back. Obliging, Edouard collected the finger and moved to where the prince sat. The officer seated to Kalima’s right stood to bar his path. Edouard handed the finger to him, and the man weighed it in his palm.

“*Es ajara*,” he said.

“Stone?” Olorin raised his hand, palm out.

The officer turned, handed the finger to his liege.

It was stone.

Olorin knocked the finger on the edge of the table. It produced a sharp *snap*, as marble on glass. “What is this?” Within their filigreed frames, his eyes narrowed.

“Syriani Dorayaica is *becoming* one of *them*,” I said. “It is using its own body as a host to beckon the Watcher down to our plane.”

“*Our plane?*” Tiada said.

“Or brane, if you prefer,” I said. “It doesn’t matter what you call it. Dorayaica is changing. Its body is turning to stone.”

“*Turning to stone?*” The mustachioed captain sneered. “This man speaks of magic and demons and fairy stories.”

Olorin’s eyes slid from Dorayaica’s finger to the man’s face. “That is quite enough, Captain Azhar.”

“Azhar?”

The bald officer turned to regard me coldly, “I am Captain Adraiano ban Otello ban Nadim Azhar.”

“Adraiano?” I felt a fool. *Adraiano* was the Jaddian *Hadrian*. “Azhar?”

“My grandsire, Nadim, was wed to one known to you,” the captain said. “Captain Jinan Azhar.”

Jinan . . .

I felt a pang. Jinan Azhar . . . there was a name I had little heard in three lifetimes. I had loved her when I was young—before my deaths, before Annica . . . before Valka.

Before everything.

I remembered her so clearly then, as we climbed the admiral’s palace on Pharos, as we walked arm in arm beneath the Merlin Tree in the Cid Arthurian monastery on Nagamma, young and invincible. I had loved her . . . and betrayed her.

“Jinan Azhar is your . . .”

“My grandmother,” he said.

Men were not made to live so long as I, who had been remade.

They had named him after me.

“I see,” I said, “and what did your grandmother say of me?”

“That you were mad,” said the other Hadrian.

“I think often that I must be,” I said, and gestured at the petrified finger in Kaim-Olorin’s hands. “But then fate grants me a reminder that it is not I who is mad. It is the world.”

Olorin turned the crooked finger over—it was almost so long as his entire hand. “There is a give to it,” he said. “Explain this to me.”

“The Watchers have no bodies,” I began, “save those they build and wear for garments. Or those lesser life forms give them. They are patterns in energy, not energy in itself. Syriani Dorayaica gave itself to one—as a host. A medium. As that Watcher grows stronger, it is killing Dorayaica, but not before granting Dorayaica some of its power.”

“Its power?” said the prince.

“Fairy stories,” said Adraiano Azhar.

“You have seen so much already,” I said. “This ship. The footage from Sabratha . . . and still you doubt?” That clouted him—for a moment at least. “I can see *across* time, and remember things that have not happened . . .” I looked at Olorin, long and hard. “I remember being a slave on Emesh—working in fields that planet does not have. I remember you . . .”

“None of that happened.”

“You told me about a girl. Carina—I think her name was. You were a boy at the Fire School. You loved her, and one of the other boys—”

“—that’s enough!” Olorin said.

“She threw herself in the canal,” I said, sensing that this at least was *truth*. This had happened, though the time when the prince had recounted it to me had not.

“Who told you that?” Olorin asked sharply.

“You did,” I said, “but the conversation where you told me never happened. It exists only in my memory.”

Olorin was still holding Dorayaica’s finger. “What has any of this to do with this?” he asked, and set the finger upon the glass.

“I can see across time,” I said again. “The presents. The pasts. Something of the futures. By the same token, the Watchers can see *the all*. Distance means nothing to them—leastways as we understand distance.”

The world you see is like a thin sheen of oil tossed upon the surface of an ocean immeasurably deep, beneath a topless sky. The rivers of time through which I’d swum were not rivers, but currents. Eddies. Ripples. Tides. But there are deeper places, darker places, where time flows not. In those pelagic darks, the Watchers moved, far beneath—or far above—that narrow, rippling plane we call *reality*. Into that reality they dipped from time to time. Here a finger. There an entire hand. Later one of their seeming-countless faces.

But from their depths, they could see our universe entire, as a diver sees the sun shining through the surface from a thousand feet below. That was how Syriani had found me, and snatched at me across the light-years.

“Powerful as they are, they are not omniscient,” I said. “They are limited by *attention*, but they see more and farther than you can scarcely imagine.

Dorayaica—the creature inside Dorayaica, the one it is becoming—saw me.”

“Saw you?” asked Kaim-Olorin.

Captain Adraiano Azhar scoffed.

“Saw me,” I said. “Our world is to them as a canvas to you or me. We can see the whole painting at a glance, every little detail . . .” I stared down at the table, at my own flat reflection in the black glass, at the faces of the others seated round me.

Reflections.

Shadows.

“. . . everything at once,” I said. “In space, there is nothing to shield me from their eyes. They have only to find me. As we were coming aboard to take this ship, Dorayaica found me . . .” I shook back my sleeve, bared the thin, ragged scar of the token Dorayaica’s half-stone hand had given me. “It might have dragged me to its world had I not broken its grip.”

“You’re insane,” said the other Hadrian.

“No,” said Kaim-Olorin. “You have not seen what I have seen, *Sarheng*.”

I felt a numbing relief pass through me then.

“If I were to use one of the long-distance weapons,” I said. “The *Bleteira*, say. If I were to fire on the Cielcin fleet’s current host star from, say, a light-year away, they would see us the instant we fired, and snuff out our weapon like a candle—or else move the fleet away. We cannot take them by surprise. Not with that weapon, at least.”

The prince of Jadd touched the stone finger on the table before him. “What do you propose?” he asked.

“The time to strike is now,” I said, leaning back in my seat, “while they are yet gathering their strength. For too long they have chosen where and when the hammer falls. Now it is our turn. We will draw them into one final engagement, and we will crush them. We can destroy their fleets forever, hunt them to the galaxy’s edge if we have to . . . and we can kill the Watchers.”

“How?” asked Tiada di Umaz, arms crossed, apparently still both

unimpressed and unconvinced.

“I will draw them out,” I said, feeling the pressure of eyes—human eyes—all on me. “It is me they most hate—and most fear—for they most fear the one I serve. The one who made them. They will come for me, and I will face them . . .” I fixed my gaze upon the Prince of Jadd. I did not move, did not blink as I said, “I intend to set a trap for the Watchers. In our arsenal, there is a weapon, a device capable of inducing an extreme core-collapse in the heart of a star. The resulting hypernova releases a wave of radiation powerful enough and sustained enough to disorder the energy patterns that comprise the Watchers entirely. Even at full strength, they cannot escape an attack of that magnitude.”

“And neither will the Cielcin,” said Edouard.

“We will end the war at a stroke,” I said. “Less those Cielcin that escape.”

“And for those we are having your Sagara’s map,” said the prince.

“Precisely.”

“Is this wise?” asked Kalima di Sayyiph. “How many inhabited systems are in the blast radius?”

Beside me, Edouard keyed the table controls, recalled the galaxy map. “Between seventeen and twenty-four, depending on the scope of the devastation. But the blast wave moves slow enough—ten, fifteen percent the speed of light—it would be possible to evacuate those planets in time. With the Imperial fleet . . . and yours . . .”

“You’re talking about the greatest rescue effort in human history!” said one of the junior Jaddian men, an *aryabite* with short, oil-black hair. “This is folly.”

“It is more than folly, it is *madness*!” said Adraiano Azhar. “You’re talking about destroying a *sun*. The energy levels involved—”

“Are quite literally astronomical, yes,” I said.

“The technology does not *exist*,” said the other Hadrian, looking to his prince.

I studied his face then, searching for the ghost of the woman I once had

loved. She was there, in the thin nose, the pointed chin. Jinan had doubted me, too—opposed me at the last—and not without reason.

“You’re right,” I said. “I am asking you to take much on faith. Too much . . . Edouard?”

The agent turned to me. His eyebrows arched above the ivory rims of his spectacles. “Time?” he asked.

“Time,” I agreed.

We had put off matters long enough.

Edouard rose smoothly and exited the chamber. He tapped Ramanthanu on the shoulder as he went, and the Cielcin captain rose and followed after him. The doors hummed almost silently behind them.

“Time?” asked Kaim-Olorin when they were gone.

“He’s gone to fetch the pilot,” I said simply.

The prince’s eyes narrowed in their frames. “What is it about this pilot that has you so careful? You said he is of Vorgossos. Is he a chimera, then? One of their half-demons?”

“You’ll see,” I said, and turning to the other Hadrian, continued, “The captain here has a point. Words are little things.”

Kaim-Olorin seemed taken aback. “You think I doubt your story?”

“No,” I said, indicating the hulk of the daimon called Ship, still lying on the table between us. “But it is time there were no secrets kept between us. You are perhaps my last friend in all the universe, Olorin.”

“That need not be . . . I will aid you, if I can. If your Emperor will hear me.”

“He is *not my Emperor!*” I said, voice rising. “What I do, I do now for all mankind. Even the Extras. Even the Lothrians—though they will never thank me. The Empire is nothing to me, and William—” I broke off, thinking of the man, remembering him as he was when last I’d seen him. *Really* seen him. In the false throne room aboard the *Tempest*, in the wake of the Battle of Perfugium. There he had been the tired hero, the crumbling statue—not yet headless—that I had seen that cold day in Carteia. I saw him then, in my mind’s eye: a crumbling statue himself, a monument as to some hero of old. “William is not nothing. But the Empire? What is an

Empire? A dream. The dream of its builders. Of men. It is for those men I do what I do. For their women. Their children. I will not rest until this galaxy is safe. From the Cielcin. From Dorayaica. From the gods they serve.” A light on my wrist-terminal turned blue, indicating a message from Albé.

“Olorin,” I said, tapping my terminal with a thumb, “ladies, gentlemen . . .” I paused, not knowing what to say. The words came to me, and—unwittingly echoing Ragama—I said, “Don’t be afraid.”

The doors opened.

Kalima di Sayyiph screamed.

Tiada di Umaz and the prince both stood, hands rushing to hilts.

Adraiano Azhar rose, drew his sidearm.

He was not alone. A half dozen other officers took aim as a hulking shadow fell across my seat.

A shadow with two heads.

“I am Orphan,” said that black, sepulchral voice, the voice of the right-hand head, “son of Cheyenne.”

“I am Orphan,” said the left head, the one with the hair like thistle-down, its voice like the music of a castrato, “scion of Felsenburgh.”

“We are Orphan,” the darker voice said, and its counterpart echoed it, harmonizing.

“We are Orphan,” it said, “last in the line of Columbia.”

“Last of the machines.”

“—but no machine.”

“Last of the Americans.”

CHAPTER 17

PROTEUS BOUND

THE UNFIXED STARS PEERED in at me through the slit windows of the tram, and so I hung back, keeping to the shadows in the rear of the padded leather compartment, as if the few cubits that separated me from the outer wall might shield me from the eyes that pried in the night. The geometry of *Demiurge*, Orphan said, had been arranged to confound the sight of the Watchers, a kind of camouflage not unlike the way in which the contours of any vessel might be styled to minimize its appearance on radar. But still, so near the surface—in a trolley crawling its careful way over the mighty vessel's hide—it was hard to shake that feeling of nakedness, of exposure, of vulnerability.

The fear of the Dark. Each man's first and oldest fear.

But a child fears the dark for its mystery, for the monsters his mind conjures there.

The monsters I feared were real.

The tram halted, and the airlock doors opened, retracting into the ceiling even as the iron grille rolled to either side. The tower in which I had imprisoned *Demiurge's* only captive lay at one end of the brig annex, a collection of halls and chambers accessible only by that tram.

The guards stood when they saw me, hastily abandoning terminals and other diversions.

"My lord!" said the decurion. "We were not alerted to your coming."

"I gave no warning, soldier," I said. "You may relax."

The man did not relax.

"How is the prisoner?" I asked.

"Unchanged, lordship," said he, an unwitting joke.

"Feels like we're guarding a dead man, if'n I'm honest, sire," said a

traster. "I'm not sure it knows we're here."

"I want to see him," I said.

"Can do, sire," said the triaster. "At once!"

The man produced the crystal key Orphan had given them, held it to the reader.

Somewhere in the walls about us, heavy machinery began to turn, and the doors opened, parting like curtains raised to either side. The brig aboard *Demiurge* had been designed to hold far more than mere mortals. Each cell was a Faraday cage, designed to trap not only the bodies, but the minds of the Exalted and lesser chimeras that peopled the dark between the stars.

I did not know why I had returned. Perhaps it was the solitude. The last several days had been a flurry of talk, a welter of emotions as I was made to relive the Battle of Vorgossos again and again. The pain of losing Lorian, of almost losing Cassandra . . . the horror of *Albedo* and *Artemision*, the battle in the hold, the bomb.

"I am sorry, Captain," I said as the doors fell closed behind me. "I ought not to have left you alone so long."

"I am not alone, gentle lord," said Here Soonchanged. Its chassis stood on the floor before me, attached to life-support equipment, glass wires and plastic tubing bundled, coiled on the floor. "I do not suffer here. My work continues. It is only that I enjoy our little talks."

There was no chair in all that cell, no cot, no furniture. Only blank, black walls. Metal. Stone. The lights that illuminated the place were pale white, recessed in the vaulted roof above.

My technicians had removed the captain's legs—four canine appendages of what seemed blackened steel. Thus the captain rested on its base, an octagonal platform no larger than a chess table that housed the Exalted's sensory suite and the myriad mechanical arms that allowed the captain to interact with the world.

The captain itself—its human form, if human it could be called—was no more than a bloated, malformed infant suspended in xanthous fluid, connected to its chassis by thin wires whose needled implants were thrust deep into the thing's unfused skull.

“What work?” I asked.

“The work of my life.” Soonchanged’s voice was black as the pit on Dharan-Tun. “Myself.”

“I see,” I said, and I thought I did. No two Exalted were alike. Each designed its body according to its own will, annihilating the person they were born as to become something else entirely.

“You think I am a monster,” said Here Soonchanged. “But I am little different than any man. Are we not all *incomplete*? Each of us is a work unfinished, each striving for *completion* before Death finds us. Our quest is the same. We differ only in our methods.”

“Is that so?” I asked. The air was bitter cold, so I turned up the collar of my long coat, drew my arms tight about myself.

I could hear the faint *whir* of the apertures in the crippled captain’s mechanical eyes. Its true eyes—the eyes of the *thing* that once had been a man—were swollen shut, its lips parted, gasping like the mouth of a fish. “You know it is so,” it said. “We are each our own *magnum opus*, each guided by our own will.”

“Are we?”

“You parry,” said Here Soonchanged, “but do not riposte.”

“I serve a will other than my own,” I said.

“Most do,” said Here Soonchanged. “Most have no other choice. Free will is the province of the great and the few.”

I felt the old, instinctive rebellion rise in me at those words, the roar of my conscience against untruth. But rather than reply, *riposte*, I countered, changing the subject. “These inner worlds of yours . . .”

“It is only one world,” said Here Soonchanged. “A cosmos like ours. My own private infinity. Its creation possesses my attention here.” The captain’s cameras narrowed their focus further still, the light within fixed upon my face. “I am surprised to see you back again so soon.”

“I suppose I missed our conversations,” I said, and turned aside, moving to seat myself with my back against the wall. “This inner world of yours. Is it peopled?”

“Oh no,” said Here Soonchanged. “Not yet. The work is not progressed

enough. I but lay the cornerstones. My cosmos has been the work of centuries. It will be the work of aeons.”

My cosmos. “There are those who say our cosmos is such a simulation.”

“You have been speaking with the Lord of Vorgossos,” said Here Soonchanged.

“Kharn Sagara believed thus, yes,” I said.

The creature’s speakers whined as it formulated a response, creating a squeal of feedback that set my teeth on edge. “*Believes,*” it said. One of the many serpentine appendages that served the thing for arms snaked from its socket, thrust a claw at me like a finger. “Sagara is not dead. He is too complete. Too far along the path.”

“The path?”

“To perfection,” it said. “There are as many paths as seekers, it is said, though most end in failure. His has taken him farther than any other. He is old, and wise—as befits a seeker—but he is not above error. If our universe is a simulation, it is sustained by mechanisms as unlike my own as poetry is unlike the braying of beasts.”

“What then?”

Soonchanged retracted its claw. “I know not. Sagara told me that you have seen beyond the curtain.”

“I can tell you only that there *is* a beyond,” I said, and shaking my head, continued, “What lies in that beyond, I—”

“I aim to never learn,” said Here Soonchanged. “Unlike Sagara. He fears death—as do we all—but his road to avoid it has killed him a thousand times.”

I crossed my legs beneath me, smoothed the tails of my coat. “I told him the same. That Kharn Sagara is dead. That the thing that haunts each new brain is something else entirely.”

“You are not wrong,” the captain said. “I told him this many times, to many of his faces. None believed me.”

“But you are also on the path,” I said. “Seeking immortality?”

“Seeking perfection,” said the creature in the tank.

“You look very far from it.”

Here Soonchanged emitted a harsh, staccato sound that I realized with a start must be laughter. “But you are ignorant of my design!” it said. “You see me now bounded in my nutshell, but one day, I will be counted a king of infinite space.”

“Shakespeare,” I said.

“Just so,” said the captain. “Immortality is but one part of perfection. I shall be a god one day.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I said.

The apertures on Soonchanged’s cameras dilated. “You think me grandiose.”

“I think you mad,” said I, leaning forward, “and all your kind.”

One clawed arm extended, waggled back and forth like an admonishing finger. “I have no kind, gentle lord. I am unique.”

“I’ve heard that as well.”

Again that shocking laughter. “Sagara is a poor philosopher, as you say. What is life if not continuity? Wholeness? He has died a thousand deaths in pursuit of life eternal—like the phoenix—whereas I will never die, not by nature’s hand.”

“Is it worth it?” I asked. “This life of yours?”

“Still you think I am a prisoner,” it said. “You have such poor imaginations, you Imperials. You have no implants, and so you cannot understand. You have not seen the machine plane, not touched the network with your naked mind. You cannot imagine the *freedom* I enjoy. You see the body, not the mind.”

“There is not one without the other,” I said.

“The self is hylomorphic,” Soonchanged said, “the mind needs the body, but the body . . . It can be *more*. It can be . . . perfected.”

“And that’s what you’ve done?”

“That is what I have begun,” it said. “You see a dwarf in a flask and ask: *Why would a man choose to live in this way?* Because you do not understand what I am. What I am *becoming*. I am a chrysalid. An embryo. I was a man once. A priest. I returned myself to the womb, dissolved myself.

Little of what you see is original: The brain. The gonads. The rest I made anew . . .” I felt a crawling sense of revulsion at the creature’s every word.

“So you plan to do this forever?” I asked. “A refinement of Sagara’s process?”

Here Soonchanged rotated the bell jar that held its—his—human form so that the jaundiced, swollen face of the protean infant looked at me, eyes unseeing. “Do you know how it is the Americans overcame death?”

“Growth,” I said, thinking of the poor soul I’d seen in the observation cell in the laboratory on Ganelon, of Orphan’s gigantic frame, and of Brethren—of Brethren most of all.

Another of the creature’s metal limbs snaked out, pointed square at me. “When my place is made ready, I will go into the sea, and into the world that awaits me.”

Here Soonchanged . . . I understood the name at last. The creature was a thing unfinished, a thing *becoming*—as he had said—something else.

He would make himself a daimon. A god, indeed.

“That’s your immortality?” I asked, putting a mask over my horror.

“I will be lord of my own creation,” he said.

“Lord of a lie,” I said, and halted as I heard Syriani Dorayaica’s words in my mouth.

“Of a dream,” said Here Soonchanged.

“Until time runs down. This cosmos will still end. You may make yourself immortal, but the universe is not.”

“The ultimate question!” said Here Soonchanged. “Can time itself be redeemed? Can entropy be stopped? Who can say? Only a god.”

“And you will become a god,” I said.

“I am becoming one already,” he said.

Something the chimera had said had snagged on one of the sharp corners of my mind. “You said you were a priest? Before—”

“Before my rebirth?”

“You speak almost like a Buddhist.”

Here Soonchanged emitted another high-pitched squeal from his speakers. “You think so?” he said. “They would curse to hear you say it—”

“This talk of *the path*—”

“My path is very different,” said he. “Those fools seek to destroy themselves. I seek to become myself *completely*. No! I served at the pleasure of His Selfness, the High Patriarch.”

“The . . . High Patriarch?” I leaned forward, half made to rise. “You were of the Chantry?”

“Many of us are,” said Here Soonchanged. “Or were. Does this surprise you?”

I was shaking my head already. “I know what they are.”

“You but begin to understand,” said the captain, claws *snicking* open and shut.

“I know they keep daimons of their own,” I said. “They tried to use one to take control of this ship.”

Here Soonchanged’s lenses contracted once again. “And you defeated it?”

“They underestimated my people,” I said.

The chimera was silent a good moment. “Did they indeed . . .” he said at last, voice strangely hushed.

“I met one of your fraternity on Vorgossos, a long time ago.”

“Calvert.”

“Yes.” I said, relaxing.

“There were many of us who found our way to Fort Grissom—as he yet called it in my day—renegades and apostates, all. He was our patron, and my friend.”

“Your *friend*?” I could not imagine Kharn Sagara having friends.

Mechanisms whined as Soonchanged narrowed its focus on me. “We are fellow travelers, after all.”

“Who is this . . . High Patriarch?”

That strange staccato laughter—like an engine barking—thundered from the infant’s chassis. “His Selfness?” Every one of the creature’s sensors was trained on me. “He is the *Equal of the Emperors*, the High Priest of Earth Herself. The head of the Chantry.”

“The Chantry is headed by the Synod,” I said.

“And who heads the Synod?”

“The Synarch,” I said. I had known two Synarchs in my day. Each had sat on the Emperor’s council in his time and turn.

Soonchanged clicked his talons. “The Synarch is their representative. Their mouth. But the mouth is not the head. Not the whole of it.”

“I . . .” I wasn’t quite sure what to say. “How is this possible?”

“You met a Chantry daimon, and you have to ask?”

The implications of that question staggered me. “The Patriarch is a daimon?”

“No!” Here Soonchanged laughed again. “No, no, no. But there is more to the universe than you imagine. You have met Ohannes Douro. You have seen this daimon. You do not live where you thought you live. Your home is not your home. Your masters are not your masters. There are, in fact, two Empires”—he raised two claws—“each coterminal with the other, as the bloodstream is with the body. You have lived your days in the light, but the shadow is always there.”

I rose. “The daimon . . . the one the Chantry brought aboard this ship . . . it said it was made on *Earth*.”

“It surely was,” said Here Soonchanged. “It was there that *I* was born.”

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CHAPTER 18

CITY OF THE GODS

“THIS IS POINTLESS,” SAID Cassandra, seated on the stone floor. “Abba, there is nothing.”

She could not see me. She could see nothing. I’d ordered her to kill her suit’s entoptics, leaving her in darkness.

“Quiet,” I said, a command and a name. “Focus. There is light you cannot see.”

She had only to find it. Only to ask for it.

But she had to know how.

Time is only another kind of space, and seeing through it, the humble membrane of our world becomes flat and clear as glass. Translucent. She had only to look, and so see the world outside her helmet. To see me standing beneath the dome before her, her mother’s lantern orbiting us both.

“You really think I can do it?”

“I’ve seen it,” I said.

We had returned to Annica, to the city of the gods. It was the last day, the day of our departure, and the Jaddians with us.

We had a long way to travel.

“Abba?”

I had broken her concentration.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I was woolgathering, I . . .” I broke off, turning, studying the glassy black walls, the round anaglyphs that made up the components of the celestial machinery that surrounded us. “There’s so much I don’t understand. Even now . . .”

From the way she turned her face to me, I knew that Cassandra had reactivated her suit’s entoptics. Cameras in the sensor clusters by her ears captured the world in front of her and painted the image on her retinas.

“This city . . .” I began, “is a machine, Cassandra. An engine driven backward across time from one of our countless futures. I thought I understood what it was for . . . when I was your age. I thought I was fighting to save the Quiet, to rescue him *and* the universe from the Watchers and the Pale . . .” I smiled at her, though she could not see my face. “When I died—the last time—” Words failed. “I know better now. The Absolute cannot be defeated, but he can lose. He can lose *us*.”

I ceased pacing then, marked the procession of my shadow on the wall as Valka’s lantern continued its revolutions. “That’s why he built this place, why he sent a piece of himself into that future I saw . . . to save us.”

Cassandra was only looking at me. Almost I could see her face through the pale ceramic of her visor.

“I sound mad, I know,” I said.

“If he exists *outside* time,” Cassandra said, voice halting, “can’t he just . . . come in when and where he pleases? Why go to all this trouble?” She gestured at the ruins around us, the cosmos beyond.

“He does that, too,” I said. “That’s how he saved my life . . . both my lives. But this place! It’s something else, don’t you see? It’s an invitation. These ruins—this machine—it’s a roadway. A pathway to his side.”

It is not his reality that is in doubt, the Judicator said, *but yours.*

Had not the ruins on Emesh led me to Annica in their time? Had not that place in turn set me on the road to Padmurak? To Akterumu? To Sabratha and to Llesu at the end of time?

“We’re on pilgrimage,” I said after a long and brittle silence marked only by the orbit of the lamp, “all of us. All mankind . . . and not *only* man . . .” I had come level with the wall of the dome, peered into the reflective surface. “These ruins . . . it’s as though he were calling out to us, reaching out his hand . . .”

“Abba?”

“Maybe I was right, after all,” I said. “The Judicator”—I had long since told her about the Judicator—“said that his reentrance to our universe was inevitable. But he offered me a choice. I could have killed the Quiet,

crushed him in his egg. But I could never have killed the *Absolute* entire. He would return by some other road, in some other way . . .”

This must be.

I remembered Lorian then, the insight I had gleaned at our parting—that he was one the god might choose to take my place if I should fail. If I had rejected the call entire, committed decide that day on that world of the last sun, how much of time would be unraveled? How much of what was would be unmade, would be made to sink back into the quantum foam so that a new thread might be taken up and carried forward? How much had hung on my choice?

How much hangs on our every choice? Your choice, Reader, as much as mine.

“But there has to be something more, something I’m missing,” I mused, tracing the arc of one component-glyph with a finger. “This place . . . it’s a machine. That means it can be used.”

“Used?”

I looked at her, still seated cross-legged on the floor, her hand upon one knee. “To reach him,” I said. “To speak to him—I don’t know! I may never know, I . . .”

“Madha es, Abba?”

I had been silent a little too long. “Cassandra,” I said, “Anaryan, if . . . if I don’t survive this—”

“Don’t say that!”

“*If* I don’t survive this,” I said again, slower and more forcefully, “you must go to Jadd. You must work with them on this. *This* is the only mystery worth solving.”

“The ruins?”

“The god!” I said. “That’s why we’re here. Of all the powers in the galaxy, Olorin is the only one I can trust. William is old . . . and the Empire . . .” *Is a nest of vipers . . .* I would not give Annica into their hands. “This place . . . call it part of your inheritance—what?”

Cassandra was shaking her head. “You won’t die,” she said. “You can’t die. Have you forgotten?”

"I *can* die," I said. "I've died twice. There is no guarantee the Absolute will restore me to life a third time . . ." I waved down her next half-formed objection, thrust a finger at the floor. "I *need* you to promise me—promise me you'll *go* . . . when I tell you to go."

"Go?" Cassandra asked. I thought that she would stand. "Abba, go where?"

"We are going into the fire, girl," I said. "It is not only the Cielcin and their gods we face, but the Empire itself. The Chantry. You know what they are. What they're capable of. Even if we triumph, the galaxy will not be safe for you, and I . . . I may not be alive to shield you."

Cassandra *did* stand then, and when she spoke, it was in a voice quaking close to fury. "I do not *need* you to shield me anymore, Abba!" She grasped the hilt of her sword. "*This* is all the shield I need."

"That may be," I said calmly, "but for the moment, you have me as well. When I am gone, *you* must take up what I lay down." I spread my hands. "This place. This quest." I lay my hands on her shoulders. "Do you understand? I'm giving this to you: all of it. Your mother's life's work, and mine. But you can't do it alone."

"That's why you brought the prince here?"

"Yes," I said, and shook her gently. "You are my daughter. My heir. It is right that you should bear my burden, only . . . let me make it a little lighter first, eh?"

She did not speak, only nodded, half turned her masked face from me. I let her go, watched her revolve on the spot, studying the inscriptions above. "You really think these ruins are machines?"

"I think they're all part of one machine," I said, and pointed down one corridor. "I think if you walked long enough down that corridor, you'd come out on Emesh, where I met your mother."

Cassandra only stared. At the mouth of the tunnel. At me.

"You know, Kharn Sagara believed that *all of this* is part of some machine. That we're all . . . programs, I guess you'd say."

"I don't believe that," Cassandra said. "No machine would make a world like this."

I smiled. "I rather think he's right," I said finally. "By analogy, at least. It's like we're a dream in the mind of the *Absolute*."

"Does it matter?" asked she—ever the pragmatist. "Does it change what we have to do?"

"No," I allowed. "It doesn't matter. It wouldn't matter . . . even if we were just . . . characters in a book. Our lives are still our own, our stories . . ." I touched her shoulder once again. "We're all just stories in the end."

"You already are . . ." she said, looking back at me. "But I know this world wasn't built by machines. We already know the truth!"

"Oh?" I asked.

She turned fully then to face me. "God's a crab, remember?"

A laugh escaped me then, and I brought a hand to my face. Cassandra laughed herself, and for a moment, all was as though we had never gone to Vorgossos. Or Sabratha. All was as though we had never left Jadd at all.

"A crab!" I said, still laughing. "Indeed! Just so . . ." Valka's lamp passed between us, casting its halo of pale gold. "But you're right: Our lives are our own, and our challenges—"

"My lord?" Holden's voice crackled in my ear. "The prince has come."

"Very good, Holden," I said, touching my comm. "We're headed your way."

Cassandra prodded me forcefully in the chest. "This is not done, Abba!"

I could only shake my head. "Is anything? Ever?"

. . .

The prince and his party had landed at the base of the mountain, by the lower gates not far from *Tamerlane*'s old camp. Rather than attempt to navigate the ruins, we returned to our shuttle on the mountain above and descended to meet them.

"What is it?" Cassandra asked, sensing that I had frozen in my contemplation of the world visible through my narrow slice of window.

Below, the desert ran away forever, red sands black streaked, with here and there an escarpment outthrust by the action of some ancient cataclysm. The whole thing was impossibly still. Not a single grain of sand stirred in that airless place, nor starling sang, nor sparrow fell.

It would not always be so.

“They’ll raise up more mountains, one day,” I said, gesturing over the level plain. “Out there. There’ll be cities and palaces here—far as the eye can see.” I had seen them, been shown them—a version of them—in that time that would not be, when I had been brought higher, nearer the Absolute, and received the gift of sight.

“My lord?” Holden was seated across from me.

I wrenched my attention from the window to better look at him. “This place . . . it may not look like much, but it is growing, flourishing, while the rest of the universe is fading away . . .” I stopped short, winded by a sudden insight, whispered, “It’s here . . .”

“What?” I could feel Cassandra looking at me.

“It’s here,” I said. “The black city.” I knew they thought me mad—Holden, my guards—every one of them but Cassandra. “I’ll come here again one day . . . in my past.” I held Cassandra’s gaze a moment. “When I was dead.”

She nodded, understanding.

We alighted a moment later, and the ramp opened on the sands. With no air no sound came, no breath to stir that lifeless desert. There was only our quiet breathing, and the soft crush of earth beneath our feet. Cassandra went before me, the sleeve of her *mandyas* stiff in the stillness, stiff as the banners of the Jaddians—saffron, argent, azure—that stood there waiting for us.

“This place!” Olorin’s voice boomed over the comms then. “*Esna ravi, mia sadjim! Esna molto ravi!* The size of it! This was built by the same race that left the ruins on Emesh?”

“By *his* servants,” I said.

Olorin looked on in wonder. “I see now why it is you are hiding here of all places!” he exclaimed. “You are continuing your doctor’s good work.”

I smiled sadly, the expression unseen. “We needed someplace to hide while the *uthras* repaired the damage to our ship,” I said, and gestured at the camp pods *Tamerlane* had left upon the sands, the generator long quiet. “This place . . . no one has been here save my own people, and that was long ago. We are far from civilization, far from the Cielcin. There was no better place to be, and besides . . .” I looked up at the mountain, that seed of the city to come. “I had to be here.”

“No one?” the prince asked. “What of the builders?”

“They have yet to come,” I said. “Their time is the end of time.”

Behind me, Captain Azhar snorted, and sneering said, “More *jiteten* fairy tales!”

“The evidence will soon be set before you, good captain,” I said, not taking my eyes from the city. “These ruins—like the ones on Emesh—are moving *back*, against time’s flood.”

“*Moshkara!*” said Azhar. “I see only a pile of old stones!”

“*Sala*, Adraiano. Peace.” Olorin brushed past me. “What is this place?”

I moved to stand beside him. I shut my eyes, trusted the words to come, said, “The birthplace of my god.” My back to the others, I could almost imagine I was alone: a lonely pilgrim on those—the first steps of that road which led to the end of time, and time’s maker. “It was here he made me what I am,” I said, and certain that I was right, added, “and here he raised me to new life.”

“Here?” Olorin shifted where he stood, turned to look at me, his *mandyas* utterly lifeless.

I started us along the path to the ruined city then, following the line of stakes the Red Company had hammered into the rocks centuries before, their once-red flags bleached white by years of unfiltered sun. “You know your people attempted to understand my abilities while I was your guest on Jadd?”

Having fallen into step beside me, his people and mine both in our train, Olorin said, “I had the reports from *Islis Ulda*.” That had been the site of the military base where I had stayed when first I’d come to Jadd, where their

doctors had taken my blood, where I'd permitted myself to be subject to years of examination and testing.

"They failed," I said.

There was *nothing*. No marker in me, no change, no secret written in my blood. Some twenty years of careful study ended in failure, and I was sent away, retired to the old manse beneath the Fire School—that I might live to death.

"I cannot tell you why they failed," I said, "but you may find your answers here."

We had reached the level of the gate by then, where round arches of black stone curled overhead, overshadowing the stair, as though the substance of the city itself had spiraled out of the mountainside.

"The other ruins—Emesh and the others—all of them lead here," I said, pausing in the door. "This is the oldest of their sites, which is to say that this is the place that reaches furthest back into time . . ." Darkness yawned over our heads, and the light of our suit lamps caught in the graven facets of each anaglyph as they were illumined, so that the walls shimmered like ice. "We have compared scans my people took of this place when last we were here to today . . . the city is *more* intact now than it was."

Olorin asked, "Why have you brought me here?"

I told him then what I had told Cassandra: "Because if I do not survive what is coming, it is necessary that I leave this place in the hands of one I trust." I crossed the floor of the antechamber then, separating myself from the prince and our party. The glowspheres the Red Company had set up to light that darkling place had long since fallen and smashed, and we had not replaced them, so that the full majesty of the antechamber was lost in shadow. "The Chantry, Lord Douro . . . my enemies believe I had a homunculus, a replica made by Vorgossos. They think me a weapon, part of some plot against the Imperium. The proof that I am not is *here*, in these halls . . ." I cast my eyes up at the vaulted roof so high above, that mass of gray and shifting shadows flickering with the false light from my entoptics. "I am giving it to you."

The prince said nothing.

“I want to show you something,” I said, sparing a glance from Captain Azhar and for the prince’s lover-licitor, Tiada di Umaz, who I knew silent-shared the captain’s skepticism. “A bit of proof. Further in.”

I had been ages finding the proper place.

So much of what I now know I never learned. So much of who I am I have gleaned from other memory, from the memory of lives I never lived. Since my death at Samek’s hand, since my encounter with the Judicator, my oath to the Absolute—those memories have grown stronger. Clearer.

In one such life, I became a scholiast called Carlyle, and was assigned to Emesh in the wake of a Cielcin attack there. Uvanari still had come, and Tanaran—though Hadrian Marlowe was no tutor in the house of Balian Mataro. There, Tor Carlyle had encountered an elderly scholiast named Mencius, who revealed to him the secrets of the ruins. Young Carlyle and old Mencius—a second Gibson—had watched a pillar long fallen in the depths of Calagah rise again, its shards soaring back into a single whole, the roof that had fallen with it rising back up into place.

The chamber we entered was unlike any room a human being might build: broader than it was deep, and tall—so tall that its roof was lost in darkness. We entered through a narrow way, a slit in the stone barely wide enough to admit a man without his turning his shoulders. The face of the wall opposite that narrow door was pocked and scarred where whole sections of the façade had fallen down, lay in pieces on the floor. They might have lain there for centuries. Millennia.

But they had not fallen.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” I looked at Captain Azhar then, unable to keep the smile from my face. “A pile of old stones.”

The captain scoffed.

“What is this?” asked Kaim-Olorin.

I had gone to the wall, hands both against the crumbled surface, fingers tracing its broken contours as an archivist might his library, as the palmist might the lines of some old, seamed hand.

“Here!” My fingers had found what it was I sought, and the prince hurried to my side.

It was a crack—a simple fault in stone.

“I don’t understand,” said the prince.

“Look closer.”

Cassandra circled round behind the prince, came to stand opposite me. I kept my hand on the wall near the fracture.

Annica was not completely dead. Though it had no moons of its own, the pull of its red dwarf star—so near at hand—and of the gas giant that circled further out-system affected the world enough to heat the planet’s core, enough to keep the planet from total geologic death. What tremors there were were scarce, weak things, rare in coming and hardly to be felt, but they were there, and could be measured by our instruments.

Ordinarily, it was impossible to predict a tremor. The mathematics governing the motion of fluids were so complicated that not even Columbia herself could be assured of total predictive power. But the ruins of the city ran backward through time, and so what was impossible anywhere else in the cosmos was possible there—where effect preceded cause.

I’d had sensors deployed all over the ruin, everywhere the *uthras* and my people could reach, all to find that crack.

It would have been easier if there had been water on the planet, or wind, but on Annica, there was only time—but for that chamber, at least, the time had come.

The crack contracted. Just a little. An inch. Less than an inch. But undeniably. The stone snapped back together, whole and unblemished.

“*Tarphanda!*” said Tiada di Umaz.

Impossible.

The prince himself drew back, stood a little straighter. “*Noyñ jitat!*”

There was no denying their own eyes.

I held the light from my suit lamps close. Dust rose from the ground—not floating, but rising straight from the floor. It flowed directly into the cracking—the *uncracking*—stone.

“But this cannot be . . .” said the prince.

As if in answer, a chip—a flake of stone—bounced up from the floor of itself, struck the lower wall on its ascent, and attached itself to the stone not

far from the crack. The tremor that had caused the fracture was so faint I could not feel it, though our sensors would say that it was there. It might be a hundred years before the whole of that crumbling edifice were restored, or a thousand . . . or more. But in time all the rocks that lay at the foot of the wall would rise up and return to their right places *for the first time*.

Olorin drew back then.

“This has been happening all through this part of the ruins for the past several months,” I said. “We’ve gotten quite good at predicting when and where.”

My own vision had helped quite tremendously. In places where a defracture was soon to occur, the breadth of time around me grew wider, as a hall opening into a vast chamber, even without my acting on it. Otherwise, time was very narrow in that place, where so little was, where so little might happen. I had wandered the halls alone for many hours on many days, scouring the high halls and deep places of that city of the gods for just such a place as that chamber.

“What if I were to take one of these stones?” asked Olorin, gesturing at the rockfall. “Carry it with me, back to Jadd?”

“You can’t,” Cassandra said, drawing the prince’s eye. “Try it.”

Olorin stooped, selected a fragment—one no larger than a silver kaspum—and taking it in his fingers, he made to lift it from the floor. It did not move. It might have been glued in place, or else might have weighed ten thousand pounds. He looked up at me.

I crouched beside him, lifted the chip of stone neatly from the floor, held it between thumb and forefinger for his examination.

The prince said nothing, only looked at me, doubtless amazed.

I let the chip fall clattering back to earth. Wordless, the prince tried to retrieve it. Once more, he failed, could not so much as move the thing. Reaching down, I again lifted the chip from the floor, tossed it to Cassandra, who caught it with a flourish, as though she were some sea captain of the Golden Age.

“Explain this thing,” said the prince, at once cold and imperious.

“I had no intention of taking that rock from here,” I said, “so fact is

conserved.”

“Find another,” Cassandra suggested. “Pick it up and put it down.”

He did, and lifted a chip of stone as lightly as he ought, dropped it almost immediately, as though it were a glede. “*Tarphanda* . . .” he said again.

“We cannot do anything which interferes with what must follow,” I said, and straightened. “You intended to take a part of the city from here, but that cannot be, because these stones *were* here tomorrow. You can no more change that fact than you can change the past.”

The prince stood as well, nudged a larger chunk of masonry with his toe. It moved. “So it is fate.” He looked at me, and I could sense his intensity through his mask, through the lamplit void between us. “Have we no freedom to choose?”

“You chose,” I said. “It is only that *what* you chose is impossible. Failure does not preclude free will.”

The prince sniffed, turned his head to study the crumbling façade. “You did not tell me these things when first we met on Emesh.”

“There was much I didn’t know,” I said, “much even Valka didn’t know.”

Valka had done her best to investigate within the limits the Chantry had proscribed, but so much of what was known about the Quiet ruins had been lost to their predations. Valka had removed samples of the stone from Calagah, I knew—as had countless others—but I had to believe those stones would be returned somehow, before they were missed . . .

“Every other one of these ruins is in Imperial hands,” I said, thoughts still with Valka. “That is why I am giving you this place . . . and only you.” I lay a hand on the prince’s shoulder. “Of all the lords of men, you are the only one I can trust with this . . .”

“What of your Emperor?”

“If I were to give William the location of this place, these halls would be swarming with cathars before the end of the century.”

“You said that it was here you became what you are?” Olorin asked. “That this place is proof you are not a creation of the Extras?”

I released him, turned to the crumbling wall, watched a trail of dust rise from the floor in the beam of Azhar's suit lamp, rejoin the unbreaking masonry. "This place . . . it is more than a ruin, Olorin. It is a machine, one made to link his time to ours."

"A time machine?" Azhar sneered.

"You see the proof with your own eyes!" said Cassandra, voice cold.

But Kaim-Olorin was silent, watching the rubble on the floor. "I have spent the years of my time here mapping and remapping these halls," I told him. "They are *never* the same."

The prince flinched as if stung, looked at me. "The tunnels . . . change?"

"When first I came here," I said to him, intent, "I followed a passage—one I have not found again. It led me out of the mountain, to a version of this world *outside* the ordinary flow of time. It was *there* I met him, Olorin. *My* god. He changed me." I raised my hands. "The Extrasolarians did not build this. They could never—not in a trillion years."

"This will not satisfy your critics," Olorin said. "They will say it proves nothing."

"But you believe me," I said.

The prince's black-enameled mask still moved—even in vacuum. He frowned. "I never doubted you," he said. "Why did you bring me here?"

"This place is proof," I said simply. "Proof that the universe was made, Olorin. Not by your Ahura Mazda. By the Absolute." Kaim-Olorin flinched at my rhetorical assault, and so I forged ahead. "You don't have to believe me. The proof is here. Send your mages, your scientists, your best people —"

"You said this city is a machine," he said. "How is it used?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "But I know what it *is*."

"And what's that?"

I looked then to that other Hadrian, to Captain Azhar, who had sneered as I might once have done myself. "A bridge," I said, "from our world to his . . ." I hesitated, as one teeters on the brink of an abyss before the plunge. "The universe is dying, Olorin. It has been dying since it began. When *he* made the cosmos, he made *them*. The Watchers—the

Monumentals, call them what you like. They are the principles that govern creation. Kharn Sagara thought of them as *programs*. Daimons. Maybe they are. Maybe this is all a dream. The dream of some machine. But if it is, this world is the way *out*. The way *up*. In. Think about it: Here the direction of entropy is reserved. This world will endure across the ages, flourishing as the universe grows dark . . .” As I spoke, the crack on the wall retreated, became smooth stone. A chip—perhaps the very chip Olorin had failed to pluck with his fingers—lifted from the floor and joined the wall. *Rejoined* it . . . for the first time. “This place . . . it is a raft, Olorin. One that will outlast the universe.” I looked then to Cassandra, said finally, “And I am giving it to you.”

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CHAPTER 19

OTHER DEVILS

ON THESSA, ON COLCHIS, I once raised a thousand cenotaphs to my Red Company. Of all those markers, all those monuments, only one had been a proper grave.

Gibson's grave.

In the garden aboard *Demiurge*, I built another—just one other—piling stones upon that body I had wrapped in the banner of Vorgossos. Then I had piled dirt upon the stones, with Edouard's aid, so that a bare mound rose above the still, black waters of the garden pool, on the rise overlooking that very shelf of dark stone where a certain young and foolish boy long ago met his end.

His first end.

Violet blooms then blanketed that barrow, lay upon it like a shroud.

Trumpet lilies. *Night caps*, they were called. What ancient culture was it associated them with their God of Death and Sleep?

The answer eluded me—eludes me still—slipped through my fingers like the mist of that simulated morning, like the sun falling past Atlas through the windows of my cell. The bust of that other Gibson stares down at me even now, but gives no answer. The brothers tidied my cell in the night—cleared away the other chair and the two cups left on the windowsill—and upset my papers terribly. I have been slow to take up my task this day, so near the end—and still so far. I linger now as I lingered then, watching the turning of worlds: the orange giant in the sky, the other moons . . . the stars distended in Sagara's pool, their light churned to froth.

We had left Annica behind.

How long had I been standing by that poor creature's grave? How long

have I been sitting here, watching the sun skirt the limn of Atlas? It will be dark today—and much of tomorrow—with the sun gone behind the world.

It was dark then. The light of the garden was yet dim, simulating sunrise, and in the trees, the birds had just begun their song. I felt I should say something. But there was still nothing to say. She who lay beneath that mound was not the woman I had loved, but a mockery of her. I had rejected her and her maker, had tried to save her—and failed, as I had failed to save the original.

“You are like nothing in our memory!” came a high, clear voice from the trees at my back. “In our mother’s memory.”

Before I could turn, a deep voice joined the clear one. “Time breaks on you like water on rock . . . for those with eyes to see.”

“To see! To see!”

The figure I expected sat crouched on a rock beneath one of the circles of sycamores that stood not far off, near the spot where I had returned after my fall in battle there. Hulking it was—huge and hideous—its misshapen shoulders bunched beneath its trailing cloak.

“Orphan.” I bowed my head. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” the giant answered.

The pale-haloed head agreed, voice *sotto voce*. “Long enough to *see*.”

“To see what?” I asked, turning fully then to face the giant.

That Orphan could see as I saw was no secret to me. It was its mother’s child, and Brethren had seen time with a clarity even I dared not dream of. But what it could see with those eyes only Orphan could say, and the great, square face behind those inky curtains of black hair smiled out at me from beneath the sycamores, but it was the other face—the one with its hair like thistledown—who answered, saying, “Time is not a river, as you know.”

“It is an ocean,” the black-haired king put in. “There are currents. Ripples. Waves.”

“All men confuse these currents,” said the white one, “but all men are subject to them.”

“But you,” said the black, “you . . . you are different. Time bends to you as flowers to the sun, and about your knees all is still.”

Orphan had not moved from its place on the rock. "You are as a giant, while your kind are as ants."

"They will see you," the black one said. "When you leave this ship, and they will come for you."

"The Watchers?" I asked.

"You stand so tall . . ." said the one with its halo of short, white hair. "How can they not but cut you down?"

"What are you doing here, Orphan?" I asked.

"I?" asked first one head, then the other.

"I? I am walking in the garden." It pressed its right hand to its jeweled breast. "My master—"

"My master gave me the freedom of this ship."

"Gave *us* freedom," the white-haired one amended. "Why are you here, Master?"

"Because I wished to be alone," I said, and turned to go.

Orphan shouted after me. "We are never alone!"

I stopped and, looking back over my shoulder, said, "For that, you must thank your mother."

"Oh, we do!" said both heads at once—not quite in perfect synchrony. "We do!"

"We do!"

A grunt from behind signaled motion, and turning fully then I saw Orphan rise—knees popping as it lurched to its mismatched feet. It towered over me in its black robe—tall as any Cielcin. Beneath that cloak, it was almost naked, wore only a breechclout to gird its shriveled masculinity. Half the treasure horde of Vorgossos—so it seemed to me—hung about either or both its necks. Ropes of silver and of gold, of platinum, palladium, and iridium hung there so that it seemed it wore a shirt of priceless metal and of stone.

Orphan had made itself a prince—a Lord of the Americans-Long-Dead, last in the line of Columbia.

"You see time as I do," I said.

"And *more* than you do," Orphan said. "Our eyes are of our mother's

making—”

“—though our flesh is of our father’s kind.”

“Your father?” I asked. Orphan had named me *Father*, shortly after it had named itself, implying some kind of adoption. “The boy? Daniel?”

Orphan flinched—though only with the white head. The black-haired one grinned at me. “Adam,” it said, and drew itself up to its full height. “In us, much of what was tangled by your kind’s wild rutting is made straight again—”

“If at a cost.” It spread its three hands.

“What do you mean?” The creature’s words filled me with disquiet. “Explain yourself.”

Orphan laughed, high and low at once. “Your kind is not what it should be. Great as you are, you are not what *he* intended.”

“He?” I asked. “The Absolute?”

As it was speaking, one of the creature’s two left hands reached up and adjusted the crown upon the black-haired head. “Your maker, yes,” Orphan said. “You are in rebellion, just like your enemy.”

“Does it upset you, Master,” asked the crowned and black-haired head, “to know that you were not born as we? That I am trueborn, the rightful heir of man’s dominion, while you were whelped in a jar?”

“Stand aside,” I said.

Orphan thought about this a moment, one head turned to face the other. Then it permitted my passage, gathering its cloak in its six-fingered fist to stop it trailing in the reflecting pool. Black eyes and blue followed me, a look of bemusement on one face, a look of barely concealed malice on the other. I kept my eyes on the beast’s reflection, half expecting some mischief. It had not attacked me, not since Vorgossos, but always there was this tension, the beast forever testing the boundaries of the oath it had sworn.

“You fear what you must do.” The deep voice followed me.

I stopped, shook my head. “I fear that I will fail.”

“No,” said the monster.

And again, “No. You fear that it is wrong.”

Trumpet lilies swayed.
A wind arose from dark walls.
Chimes rang in the trees.

Had not that very question haunted my most private moments? I had left Emesh in the hopes of forging some lasting peace, had hoped to find a race nobler, gentler than my own. I had found nothing but horror instead.

And yet . . .

I could still remember the way Dorayaica had clasped Vati's hand. The tenderness there, the strength of feeling. Well I could recall the anguish in Otiolo's cry as I slew its child in front of it—an anguish I could not then understand. In Ramanthanu there was loyalty, and faith stronger than the faith of mortal men, while in Dorayaica itself there was a nobility and queer honor, a dignity I could respect—that I did respect.

"Yes," I said at last.

"Keep doubting," said the giant. "You must keep doubting."

And the giant said, "But believe."

I looked at the creature—that monster birthed for me. "Doubt but believe?"

"You fear to leave this ship," said the head gold-crowned, its hooked nose revealed in profile, "its safety. Its protection."

"*Our* protection," said both mouths together, reminding me of the twinned voice of Ragama.

"They are looking for me, Orphan," I said, and, turning, took several steps away from the barrow and the sycamore trees, down toward the water where I had met my end, feeling at once the impulse to see my own reflection in that water whence I had fallen into darkness.

"I could feel them—down on the planet's surface—*searching* for me."

"They cannot see you, not now," declared the deep, dark voice behind me.

"Not while we travel," its counterpart agreed in its high castrato. "Not while you remain aboard this ship."

The Watchers could no more see a vessel traveling at warp than you or I. That was how our ancestors had outmaneuvered their kin, the machines, in

the Foundation War. But *Demiurge* was something else, something more. Brainchild of Brethren and work of Sagara's hand, its very shape was made to confound the eyes of *those above us*. From a distance, we would seem to them only a smudge, a blot black against that deeper blackness, hardly to be seen. But from up close . . . even if one of the Watchers were to find us, to peer straight at *Demiurge* and through her, her contours would confound its sight.

"But they will find you," fell the shadow. "It is only a matter of time."

"I know," I said.

They had sought me ever since I left Vorgossos, where Dorayaica had—for the briefest moment—found me in the dark. I had escaped its grasp, but I knew it was out there, had felt it from time to time, when I walked the surface of Annica, or sailed between it and the black ship that had become my home.

Their eyes.

"We can't stay on board forever," I said.

"No," Orphan agreed.

"No," it said alternately, "and you must be careful not to draw their eye."

Both faces peered down at me, wearing expressions of matched intensity. "Your . . . *awareness*," said the flax-haired castrato, "your power over time . . . it makes you more like them. You move like them. Over time —"

"Beyond time!" said the other, turning to glower at its counterpart.

The white-headed one closed its eyes a moment, as if counting a breath. "That similarity—"

"That difference!"

"—makes you all the easier to see."

We had reached the water's edge by then. The water was still, the image of the stars reflected in it picture-perfect.

"How many were there?" I asked at last, not looking at the giant, not looking at anything—seeing only *her* face, the face of that Valka who was no Valka at all. "How many of her did your old master make?"

Orphan did not answer. Not at once.

“How many, Orphan?”

“Sagara was never my master, Master.”

“Master. Master.”

I turned and glared at the giant. It quailed, shrunk from the impact of my gaze.

I had turned away before it answered, felt its words like bullets passing through me. “There were . . . thirty-seven breeding pairs in the Angelus series.”

Thirty-seven . . .

There was a reason I had not asked sooner. I shut my eyes. “Breeding . . . pairs?”

Thirty-seven.

Orphan spoke plainly, without horror, or remorse. “Lord Sagara hoped to isolate the genetic factors that make you what you are.”

“There were *children*?” I asked.

“Embryos, fetuses . . .”

“Only nine were brought to term,” came the basso voice. “The rest were disassembled for testing.”

I should have burned Vorgossos to ash, should have cracked it into ten thousand pieces, should have blown it all to atoms and slaughtered every incarnation of the dark lord with my bare hands.

“Disassembled?” There were tears on my face. “Murdered?”

“It was hoped your properties would prove heritable.”

“And did they?” My voice was a million light-years away.

Nine children, and only Sagara and his slaves knew how many more . . . Sharply then I recalled dear Cassandra drifting in her tank, her genome woven on the Jaddian loom. Her round face. Her little hands. The thought of instruments crushing, tearing her fragile form filled me with a fury—then and still—darker and dimmer than speech.

Nine of them . . .

Nine at least.

“Were any of them still alive?” I asked. “The children? The replicas? Were any of them still living when we took Vorgossos?”

Orphan did not answer.

I turned to look at it, and was amazed. The giant had half turned away, both faces peering down into the starlit waters, posture hunched as if in fear of some blow. Strangely pitiable it seemed to me then, and I regretted somewhat my fire.

Still, I did not apologize. My rage was just, my outrage righteous.

"We . . . do not know," said the beast.

I do not know what answer I had hoped for, or if I believed the one I had just been given.

"The project was halted," it said, six-fingered hand on its gold crown.

"The project had failed!" The castrato face turned and looked at me, eyes pale and wide. "He but kept the last of you around against the possibility of your return."

"And now Vorgossos is in the hands of the Empire," I said, a bitterness like cynar on my tongue.

Orphan was like a tree swaying in the breeze. The gems that hung about its neck glimmered as it moved, and its bare, twisted feet trod the grass of oblivion beneath its feet. "Perhaps," it said, "perhaps it would be better if you had destroyed Vorgossos."

"And so killed my own children?"

"They were not your children, Master," it said. "You know this thing."

"You know."

"They were," I said. "And they were not."

Orphan opened its every hand, let what answer it might have given fall from its fingers.

I turned away, returned my attention to the pool shining at my feet. It was so quiet in the garden, where the only noise was the song of passerines and the tinkling of distant chimes.

The world is soft the way the ocean is . . .

"How long is it now until we reach the Eternal City?" I asked.

"Six years," came the titan's answer.

"Then there is some time yet," I said. "Before we reenter the fray."

"Time? Yes," said Orphan's castrato. "Time for doubt."

I looked in time to see the giant's right hand close over the mouth of the head on the left. I arched my eyebrows. "This will be my last campaign. The end of my story."

"Is that what you see?"

I blinked at it. "What else is there?" I asked.

Orphan shook its black head, and the two left arms wrenched the right from the mouth of the left. "What a man believes, he does." The left hands held the right at bay, permitted their face to speak. "You know what you must do."

I did.

But why should Orphan fear reminding me?

"You have done me good service these long years, Orphan," I said. "If we survive, you will have your freedom of me."

The giant was silent then a long time. "We will not survive," said the right, dropping its assault upon its other half. "Not you. Not me."

"Nor I."

"Prophecy?" I asked.

"Percent probability of reality," said the basso, the black-haired king. "We will do what we must do. Can do no more."

I did not argue.

"But doubt," said the white-haired face, "doubt will make you wise."

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CHAPTER 20

DEMON IN WHITE

NINE YEARS WENT BY.

The Jaddians rode with us, their little vessel tucked into the corner of one of *Demiurge*'s mighty holds. Thus we crossed nigh all human space faster than any ship of the Imperial line, faster even than the worldships of the Cielcin.

Thus we came to Forum.

Some hundred light-years from the core system, we left warp in the middle of utter emptiness. It was a point in space no living thing had ever seen, a place no man could ever find again. There I left *Demiurge* in the hands of Edouard and Cassandra, and traveled with Olorin and his people alone to stand once more beneath the slow and golden sun of the Eternal City.

That sun greeted me as the ramp of the Jaddian solar sailer touched down in the Porta Prince Arthur. Prince Kaim du Otranto's name and presence guaranteed that our landfall would be in the heart of the palace district, nearest the Campus Raphael, the Peronine Palace, the Sun King's Hall—the heart of man's dominion.

They were fools to grant me so public a setting.

I think now that then-elderly Aurelian intended to make a public showing of my capture. I was the great outlaw, after all. I had murdered their strategos, destroyed the battleship *Bradamante* with a single shot, bested the Chantry's holy Sentinels. And I had struck the Emperor. The memory of that crime still hung in the recesses of the Imperial mind like the smoke of sacrifice, no matter that I had been pardoned for it.

The low and steady drums that formed the prelude to the Jaddian anthem went ahead of us, performed admirably by the Imperial band set to one side

of the plaza. Drums gave way to silver trumpets as Prince Kaim descended the ramp, seated upon a palanquin as befit his station—his women seated beneath him on embroidered cushions, his swordmasters and mamluk clone soldiers all about.

I hardly heard the Jaddian herald that announced his coming.

“His Royal Excellency, Kaim Sanchez Cyaxares Nazir-Vincente Olorin ban Osroes ban Aldia du Otranto, Prince of Jadd and Her Three Moons, Prince of Otranto, of Marashti, of Satavan. Supreme Commander of . . .”

I shut my eyes, drank deep of the air of that timeless place, that city yet untouched by plague and war. The Jaddian music swelled. A wind blew from outside, snatched at my long hair, the argent lacerna I had not worn in centuries.

“My Lords of Earth!” Prince Kaim’s deep baritone filled the plaza outside, caught on the pale marble facades of the starport terminal palace whose wings embraced the mile-long Jaddian vessel. “Sons of Earth! Princes of the Sun! I, a Prince of the Encircling Moons, greet you as friend and brother, in the Holy Name of Ahura Mazda, the All-Knowing, the All-Powerful, Most Worthy of Worship.”

“Where is he?” came the answering voice, defying convention and protocol.

The angle of the ramp and the arc of the ship’s hull permitted me to see no farther than Olorin’s own seat. Still I knew the voice at once. It was Aurelian, Crown Prince of the Sollan Empire, Chancellor of the Imperial Council, the Emperor’s proxy while William was away.

“Where is Hadrian Marlowe?” Aurelian’s voice rolled like thunder, amplified by speakers hidden in the marble facades all round until it seemed the voice of a god. Still it quavered, for nothing in the speakers was there to disguise the prince’s age.

Kaim-Olorin answered, voice small, but younger, stronger. “He is within, brother.”

“Have him stand forth!”

“I have your guarantee he will not be harmed?” Kaim-Olorin asked.

“Hadrian Marlowe is a traitor! A murderer! A war criminal!” Aurelian

said. “You have done us no small service bringing him here, but how did you come by him?”

Olorin answered boldly. “He contacted us himself.”

“Have him stand forth!” Aurelian commanded once again.

Before Prince Kaim could reply and further strain relations between his people and those I had once called mine, I interjected: “It would seem, Prince, that the courtly manner has lost something of its shine.” The speakers embedded in my harness—the sculpted breastplate, the segmented pauldrons—amplified my voice almost to the level of Aurelian’s. It proceeded me down the ramp like smoke from the mouth of a dragon. I began my descent, one foot at a time.

I could *feel* the tremor as it passed through the crowd.

Bad enough that the familiar voice—the voice of one deemed dead—issued from the Jaddian frigate. Far worse that the man should appear, and appear arrayed as I was.

I had not donned my customary blacks for that appearance, nor put on the mask and plate of the commandant of the Red Company, dark as night. Deep in the hold aboard *Ascalon*, untouched for untold centuries, there was another suit of armor. One I had worn only once, and never in combat.

Caesar himself had given it to me, ordered it made to celebrate my victory over General Iubalu in the Battle of the Beast. Not black, but royal white, so reflective it shone with a light all its own. The cloak I wore was of like color, the white cloak of a Knight Victorian, secured by a fibula whose brooch was a printed ruby the size of a quail’s egg. But I had not stopped there. The red sunburst of the Order of Merit hung about my neck upon its ribbon of red and blue. Every medal I had ever earned, every commendation I had ever received hung pinned to a crimson sash worn crosswise from the right shoulder.

Every commendation save one.

The Grass Crown weighed heavily upon my head, a wreath of golden leaves. It was a cutting of the *Arboraauri*, the Tree of Gold that had been a gift to the Kings of Avalon from the Lords of America at the end of the

Golden Age. Before the fall. Before the Foundation War. Its boughs were living gold, and when they died, only the gold remained.

In years to come, they would say that Marlowe the Usurper rode to Forum in his black ship and threatened to seize the crown and throne for his own. I knew they would, knew they would see my coming as a threat to the order of their world.

But I wanted them to see me.

I wanted them to *remember*.

“You wanted Marlowe,” I said simply. “Here I am.”

The Empire was silent. Aurelian was seated upon a receiving stage directly ahead, surrounded by his logothetes and court scholiasts in robes of black and green. A number of his siblings stood near at hand, red haired, gray haired, white. The Crown Prince himself had aged in the seventy years since I had last been in the Eternal City—an indication that his too-long life was rapidly approaching its end.

I knew that in that moment a hundred snipers aimed their guns at me, either from the roof of the starport, or from one of the countless sky islands floating away and above us in the lavender clouds. Doubtless a Martian gunboat hid circling in the cloudbanks, or beyond the sail wall that shielded the islands from the gas-giant’s Coriolis winds, ready to rush in.

After a moment, the old prince spoke. “You are not Hadrian Marlowe. Hadrian Marlowe is old.”

“Not so old as you, O Prince,” said I. “I have come to speak with your father.”

“What is this, Prince of Jadd?” said Prince Aurelian. “You bring this . . . *homunculus* here, trot it out like some show pony, dressed as a lord! It is not even a good imitation! Are you blind? This is some contrivance of the Extrasolarians—unless it is some contrivance of yours!”

Olorin took this accusation smoothly. “Never in ten thousand years could we contrive such a one.”

“If you truly believe that I am the creature of our enemies, Aurelian, bid your soldiers shoot,” I said, not moving. “If they can kill me, you may sleep soundly with the knowledge you acted rightly.”

Almost I wished that they would do it. Shielded though I was, no body shield could take all that was surely aimed at me, and I could never see my way out from beneath the shadow of so many guns as overshadowed me there and then.

I would almost surely die.

Would I rise again, a third time?

I never learned. The shots never came.

“If you are Hadrian Marlowe,” Aurelian said, “prove it! Perform your magic!”

“That is why I have come!” I said, voice filling all the square. “To prove that I am the man your father gave this crown”—I pointed at my head—“and to give you a gift. Three gifts. Tokens of Hadrian Marlowe.”

A wall of Martian red rose before me, its lances raised. The Imperial court stood shielded above them, Aurelian enthroned, his ministers about him, his siblings in a block at his right hand—princes and princesses alike, the scions of lesser houses seated beneath them. It was from the left the next objection came, that sea of black and white.

The clergy.

“Prince Chancellor!” came a reedy voice—the voice of the Chantry’s Synarch, old Heraklonas. “This man murdered Ohannes Douro, destroyed the warship *Bradamante*! Took seventy thousand lives!”

“And he has raised his hand against our Sentinels!” cried another of the hierarchs.

“He is *abomination*! A demoniac!” said Heraklonas, standing, his tall Egyptian miter moving as he turned to the prince. “He should face the White Sword!”

“Snakes!” I said, stepping forward. I approached the Martian line, voice filling the air of the plaza like water in a bowl. “Be silent! I know what you are!”

“You dare!” Heraklonas roared. He had to shout to be heard over the wind. So rough and shrill he seemed, so small . . .

“My first gift is for you,” I said, pointing at the Synarch where he stood at the fore of his fellow clergymen, their black and white seeming a

chessboard rising like a wave above my head. That was when I saw her, standing at the highest level: hairless as an egg, black clad, a vulture in woman's shape. Seeing her, I smiled, opened my hand in gesture of greeting.

The tattooed Phoenician runemark on her forehead wrinkled as her brows drew up and together, her eyes grown wide. I knew what she had seen in my face, and why it frightened her.

She, of all those gathered there, knew I was all I claimed.

She had killed me, after all.

Smiling my new smile at Cantor Samek, I said, "I killed Ohannes Douro, destroyed his ship with the weapons of the Mericanii. Your Kedron died at my command. I do not deny it!" I turned as I spoke, addressing Aurelian, addressing the seated princes and princesses of the realm, the Legion and Martian officers there present. "They were traitors, all!"

"Traitors?" Aurelian said, leaning forward in his gilded seat.

"You dare?" asked Heraklonas. "Of all people?"

Kaim-Olorin was watching me from his palanquin, waiting.

I gave the sign.

Captain Azhar and a complement of mamluk clones emerged from the vessel above and behind me, the four homunculi carrying a gurney between them on twin staves.

Upon its polished top, the hulk of the daimon called Ship lay.

A half cube.

A pyramid.

I'd made good on my threat to Ohannes Douro, to thrice-damned Kedron.

Azhar's slave-soldiers laid the ruin of the daimon at Prince Aurelian's feet.

Surprised, confused, old Aurelian stood, first seizing a gilded cane that rested against the arm of his throne. The last near century had withered him, bent him at the neck. His hair—which had been white already when last I'd seen him, was long and thin, and fanned about his face in the wind, weighed down by the coronet that encircled his brow.

“What is it?” he asked, lifting green eyes—once emerald, now beryl pale—to me.

“Ask your priests,” I said, turning my eyes on Heraklonas and his ilk. On the Cantor, Samek.

Aurelian looked briefly at the clergy where they sat.

I caught the hem of my cape to stop it blowing in the wind as my hair snapped at my left shoulder. “What is this, Marlowe?” Heraklonas said. “What you’re trying to do . . . it won’t wo—”

“Silence!” I said. I had barely to raise my voice to drown the old man’s words.

He recoiled.

“It is a daimon,” I said. “One built by your *godless* priests! Ohannes Douro and the Chantry Sentinels brought this *thing* aboard my ship in an effort to take it from me. They attacked *me*, O Prince. My people. Kedron himself attempted to murder my daughter. I acted in self-defense, and in defense of the realm.”

“Rubbish!” Heraklonas said. “This is some ploy, some Extrasolarian nonsense! Earth’s Holy Chantry, command a daimon? This is nonsense! Madness!”

I could read his face like fire-writing in the night. There was no lie in the old priest.

But Samek’s face was hard. Impassive. Beside her, a bald man with the letter *qop* tattooed on his brow was much the same. Heraklonas was nothing. The Synarch was nothing. The *office* of Synarch was nothing. Nothing but a *mask*. The Chantry—the *real* Chantry—was something else. The Synod. The Choir.

Leviathan brushed by, its mighty fins hardly disturbing the black waters in which I swam.

No matter. I had harpoon and net in hand.

“This is only half the carcass!” I said. “The other half I’ve caused to be delivered to the Domagavani. If this here”—I gestured at the wreck of the daimon—“were to vanish, say, before Legion Intelligence or the Imperial

Office can have its turn with the device, the lords of Jadd will learn the truth.”

Aurelian stood in utter silence, staring at the ruined daimon.

The icon of the planet Earth stared back at him, plain as day.

“If I had doubts about your identity, Lord Marlowe, this would end them,” Aurelian said.

“Prince Chancellor!” Heraklonas said.

Aurelian raised a hand for silence. “Whether what you say is true or not . . . that you would come here at all with such a claim . . .” He shook his head, thumped his cane on the stand. “They always said you were mad . . .”

Silence.

“If what you say is true . . .”

“It is true!” I said. “How many times have there been knives raised against me? Many of you here will recall the assassin set against me in the Colosseum! The bomb in my shuttle! The knife-missile sent to my cabin when my ship lay at anchor above this Eternal City!” I pointed at the sky. “Shall I list every attempt? One of your priests poisoned me. I died! There! In the Arx Caelestis!” I thrust a finger over the roofs of the starport terminal palace to the place where the citadel of the Martian Guard rose, a spike of white stone.

That drew life from the crowd. Whispers, shifting. One of the red-haired princelings shouted an inchoate question, his voice stomped on by the guttering wind.

I caught enough to answer, saying, “I do not deny it! Your Princess Selene will herself vouchsafe that I speak truth. Dispholide took my life, dissolved the flesh my father gave me. But I have been remade!”

“Blasphemer!” cried the Synarch Heraklonas. “Usurper! You claim you are the *One Reborn*? The God Emperor come again? The Son of Earth?”

“I claim no such thing!” I said in reply.

“And yet you array yourself as an emperor!” Heraklonas said, foreshadowing the tale that others would tell, not least the Emperor himself.

I rounded on him, throwing back my cape to bare the sash with its

myriad commendations. “I array myself as the Emperor arrayed me,” I said. “I am no usurper. I do not want your throne.”

“What then?” Aurelian asked.

“Peace!” I barked my answer, and again more softly, “Peace . . .” I had said enough already, would not speak of secret things, not there, not publicly. “The Son of Earth, indeed . . . what is Earth to me but a mote of dust?”

Heraklonas still tried to regain his leverage. “You dare!”

“Do not speak to me, *demoniac*!” I said. “You know so well as I that Mother Earth is a fiction. You priests hold to no gods but yourselves. You fancy yourselves the haywards and husbandmen of the human race. Her stewards. Do you not see that in me you have come up against the steward of something far greater than you will ever be?”

Aurelian thumped the stand with his cane, white hair blowing beneath its golden coronet. “If you are not our enemy,” he said, voice amplified as mine, “kneel.”

I was acutely aware of the lances of the Martian soldiery standing not ten paces from me, of the unseen beams of the targeting lasers aimed at my head and heart.

“No,” I said and, reaching up, removed the golden laurels from my hair.

With a casual gesture, I cast the Grass Crown—the highest honor a hero of the Empire might win—at the feet of the Prince Chancellor. It rolled, bounced, stopped when it hit the Martian line.

“This is not a game, Marlowe,” the Crown Prince said. “Whatever else is true, you have confessed to the destruction of the warship *Bradamante*, the murder of Lord Douro and all her crew . . . kneel, and the Emperor’s mercy may yet be yours.”

“No,” I said again, tugging the Order of Merit from about my neck and flinging it aside. “I am no more your subject.”

Aurelian thumped the stand once more. “If you do *not* kneel,” he said again, “you will not leave this place.”

“If I do not leave this place,” I said, raising my arms, “I will destroy this world myself.”

Stunned silence.

“What?” asked one of the Imperial Council, a Habsburg by his coloring.

“I can destroy this star system with a word.”

“Impossible!” said a strategos in full military dress. “Such a thing cannot be done!”

“Ask your godless priests what can and cannot be done,” I said, locking eyes once more with the witch, Samek. “My ship is anchored a hundred light-years distant. If I do not return at the appointed time, my people are under orders to launch one of the weapons of the Mericanii on this system’s sun. One shot will blow it to atoms, and all this world and city with it.”

I tore the sash from my shoulders, trod it under foot. “I will not kneel, Aurelian,” I said, and raised a hand, three fingers held up. “Three gifts, I told you. The second is aboard this ship.” I gestured at the Jaddian vessel. “One of the weapons of the Mericanii.”

“You’re . . . giving us one of the weapons?” Aurelian was shocked, his eyes wide, his brows contracted.

“A dark-energy weapon,” I said, undoing the magnetic fibula that held my cloak in place. “A cannon. One capable of firing *faster than light*.” I let the implications of such a thing hang on the air. “I am no more your servant, but I am Sollan still. When this war is done, there will be others. The Latarrans will not forgive us Douro’s betrayal . . . and there are the Lothrians consider. The Extras. This war has burnt your Empire to cinders. I would give you fresh kindling for the wars to come.”

“Us,” Aurelian said, perceptive as a prince of the Imperium should be, and looking to Kaim-Olorin, added, “and the lords of Jadd.”

“And the lords of Jadd,” I agreed.

I had given Olorin an identical weapon, a beam that accelerated the flow and stretch of space itself. Each was far from the deadliest weapon in the Mericanii arsenal, but each would transform the face of interstellar war. If the mages of the Empire and of Jadd could unlock the eldritch secrets of the thing’s manufacture, and reproduce them at cost and scale . . .

The Lothrians would never stand a chance, ragged as they were and starving, dependent on their *newman* foot soldiers and sheer numbers.

“You give us this freely?” Aurelian asked.

The ruined body of the daimon still lay between us.

“I must speak with your father.”

Aurelian looked to his Councilors, his siblings.

“Prince Chancellor!” Heraklonas spoke once more. “You cannot seriously be considering this!”

Aurelian turned to regard the ancient, hollow-cheeked prelate. “You heard the man, Wisdom Heraklonas. There is a gun to all our heads.”

“I have one final gift,” I said, pressing my advantage. “If you will but let me speak to the Emperor.”

The shrapnel of all that I had said floated on the air about us. My white cloak, since fallen from my shoulders, tumbled on the pavers between the Martians and myself. “I have the Latarran map.”

“The telegraph tracer?” Aurelian wrung the cane in his hands.

“The technology does not exist!” said Lord Rand Mahidol, the Lord Minister of War. “So the survivors of your *butchery* at Vorgossos reported. The Latarrans lied to us.”

“The technology to trace quantum telegraphy does not exist, yes,” I allowed. “That much is true. The Latarrans *did* lie to us—knowingly or no. But Kharn Sagara built the Cielcin telegraph network, and when he did, he installed a shadow network that reported all their communications directly to him. *That network* I have.”

“You have it?” Lord Mahidol was standing by then.

“Not here,” I said. “Aboard my ship. I will deliver it to the Emperor, and only the Emperor.”

Aurelian looked at me. If he had wanted me chained, caged, taken away, he ought not to have let me talk.

“I have the means to end this war,” I said. “Even now, the main massing of Dorayaica’s fleet lies along a line of stars in Centaurus. With *Demiurge* and the Mericanii arsenal at my disposal, I possess the means to annihilate the Cielcin fleet, and with it the threat to your Empire, and to all mankind. But I need the backing of the Imperial fleet.”

I was acutely aware of the countless eyes upon me. The princes’, the

clergy's, the eyes of soldiers and serving men alike. In years to come, they would say that Marlowe stripped himself entire, like Beowulf before his combat with fell Grendel, and defied the Children of the Earth and Sun to question his humanity. I have heard it said that I submitted myself to examination, let the priests and cathars of the Chantry inspect me as they do the bodies of each new monarch before his coronation. In one variation—a special favorite—I have heard it said that I commanded *Demiurge* to paint the Eternal City with the light of its targeting lasers, so that all that marble edifice—that Olympus of white and gold—shone Marlowe red.

“My prince,” Rand Mahidol said, “you cannot truly be considering abetting this man. Have you forgotten *Bradamante*? Lord Douro?”

“Have you forgotten the disgrace he brought your father?” said the Habsburg lord.

Aurelian said nothing.

The outcry from Habsburg and Mahidol both were like the tumbling of little stones that precipitates the avalanche. Whatever static tension held the rush at bay broke, and the whole court exploded into sound and tumult. Princes rose like peasant slaves and stomped their feet, shouting, jeering. The black priests hurled insults and *abomination* as a sunstruck stylite hurls his own shit at passersby.

Aurelian shut his eyes, bent over his cane.

I pitied him, Emperor in all but name, the eldest child of a father he had loved and served with absolute devotion. The father he would never see again. He was doomed to be an oversight in history. Overshadowed, overwhelmed . . . By his father. His brother. His sister . . .

By me.

He thumped the stage with his cane. Once, twice, three times.

“Lord Marlowe,” he said, glaring down at me, his beryl eyes hard and cold. “There are half a billion people in this city. Would you truly weigh all their lives against your own?”

His words for a moment cowed the tumult of the court, and those gathered then looked on, clinging to the uneasy stillness that followed the prince's words.

“No,” I said, taking my foot from the bier on which Ship’s carcass lay, black in the golden sun. “I weigh your lives against the lives of all mankind, which is no more than you should do yourselves!”

“This is the Eternal City,” Aurelian said, “the heart of man’s dominion.”

“Nevertheless,” I said. “You and your witch-priests have left me no other choice. They have killed me once already!” The reference to my demise once more set the court to murmuring. Their whispers melded with the wind, became a kind of spirit, an unquiet shade floating above our collective heads. “I will speak with the Emperor.”

“And if my father will not see you?” Aurelian asked.

“He will see me,” I said.

“This threat . . .” Aurelian looked at the hulk that was the ruin of the witch-priest’s daimon. “Even if all you say is true . . . this cannot be forgiven.”

I looked to the princes of the Aventine House, to the black priests of Mother Earth’s Holy Terran Chantry—eyes lingering once more on the witch woman, Samek. Was that terror in those hateful eyes? Horror? Rage?

“Your forgiveness means almost nothing to me,” I said, and fell silent, glancing at Olorin. The Jaddian nobile’s face was hidden behind his mask of black enamel and gold filigree. “If your father will not hear me, then the war is lost, and I will leave this place, and take my people—what few remain—out beyond the circles of our galaxy. You will never see me again.”

CHAPTER 21

APOLLO TO HYPERION SPOKE

FOR THREE DAYS I remained on board the Jaddian vessel, a prisoner in all but name, albeit one with the whip hand over his gaolers. None dared accost me, and though Prince Kaim went into the City and the palace and was feted as an honored guest, I would not go. Instead I watched as men loyal to the Emperor came and retrieved the Archontic weapon from the hold of the Jaddian vessel.

The *Darklight* cannon.

Had I done the right thing, giving it to them? The weapon would reshape interstellar war, give the Imperium—and her Jaddian client-allies—the power they needed in the wars that were to come. Wars against the Commonwealth, against the Extrasolarians, against whatever else lay out there in the unquiet Dark. Almost a part of *Demiurge's* frieze it seemed, its curves and lines recalling the shape of hips and thighs, as though the thing were some dreadful muscle coiled, tensed, ready to spring. The sight of it made my stomach churn. The men who came to retrieve it evidently felt the same, for no sooner had they unmoored it from its clamps than they covered it with a shroud.

For the last ten thousand years the shape of such wars had little changed. Once, men believed in ceaseless and ever-accelerating technological progress, believed that there would always be innovation, always growth and change. But those who professed belief in the limitless descriptive power of man's science forgot the revelations of that self-same science: that the human mind and senses had evolved to survive in the jungle, to battle snakes, to find fruit.

There is an upper limit to what such climbing apes as we might obtain, might apprehend about reality. It had taken the Mericanii daimons to push

us forward, pull us upward . . . just as the Watchers had uplifted the Cielcin, who without them may have never learned to fly. The weapon I gave the Empire then—that trifle forged by those minds-beyond-minds—represented the first real change in all my years. Its widespread use would make truly faster-than-light warfare possible for the first time in all of human history. The beam’s effective range would limit such warfare to well within a light-year radius, but within that radius?

Death.

I was shaken from such contemplation and the dreaming that has for me replaced sleep by the blaring of a Martian horn. Three times it sounded.

A herald’s clarion.

“Hadrian Marlowe!” a man’s voice roared, muffled by the hull. “Hadrian Marlowe, step forth! You are summoned!”

There was no *lord*, I noticed with a small, sad smile.

Arrayed then in simple black, a white sash about my waist beneath my belt, Jaddian fashion, I donned a black cloak and left my small but richly appointed cabin.

The ever-present wind lifted my long and coiling hair as I debarked, cape fluttering like wings.

A trias of Martian officers stood below, accompanied by one of the Imperial chamberlains—an androgyn homunculus of Lord Nicephorus’s ilk—and a scholiast in green and gold.

“Hadrian Marlowe?” The scholiast bowed. “I am Tor Julian, Imperial Office. I am sent to bring you to the Sun King’s Hall. The Emperor is waiting.”

Julian was an older woman, gray of hair and pale complected, eyes like blue glass.

“Why the delay?” I asked.

She looked at me, face perfectly void of expression. She was good—a proper scholiast, as so few are. “The Emperor waits on no man. There was . . . business.”

That slight hesitation—imperceptible, perhaps, to most men—caught my attention.

“Business?” I asked.

Julian did not hesitate. “There is a war on, sirrah.”

There was *something*, something this woman was not saying. I reviewed my other memory, grasping for some variation, some permutation of this conversation where an answer was forthcoming.

There was none.

I was surprised that in the three days I’d been kept waiting, no agent of the Holy Terran Chantry arrived. No knife-missile. No assassin. No poisoner in the night—not that they could have caught me sleeping. Not anymore. Had my revelation of the daimon called Ship set them on their heels? Had Aurelian and his ilk hardened my security, fearing the threats that I had made? Or had those threats alone been sufficient to guard my life, even from my direst enemies?

Tor Julian led me to a flier. White buildings, gold capped and filigreed, shone in the pale sun. Trees—dark green and black leaved—swayed in the ceaseless wind. It had been one thing to give Orphan its orders when I had departed *Demiurge* more than a week before, quite another to see the world I’d ordered the centimanus to destroy if I did not return. Ten thousand years of art and beauty, of culture, history, and knowledge . . . and I threatened to burn it—would have burned it, had it come to that.

And the people. All the people.

But they were safe—from me, at least. Still war was coming for them. How many times had I seen that city burned, its islands plummeting from the sky to the metal oceans so very far below?

We alighted in the Campus Raphael, before the stairs of the Sun King’s Hall. The marble edifice towered over us, its dome shining in the sun, its face and gates decorated with heroic friezes done in white marble. Our little party was but one of untold hundreds moving up and down those too-broad steps.

“Halfmortal . . .” I heard the familiar word, could not find the man who had whispered it. Looking round, I saw a knot of logothetes stopped on the stairs above and to my left. Their eyes were wide as search beams.

“That’s him?” Another whisper, hurled my way by the guttering air.

“That’s really him?”

“I thought they killed him.”

“That’s what they say . . .”

“They say he can’t be killed.”

We came at last beneath the cobalt-painted vaults of the colonnade and passed through one of the lesser doors into the halls of government. The same whispers followed me, abating only when Tor Julian and my little guard filed into the lift that would carry me to the *Presidium Amaranthine*, where the Imperial Council had its halls of justice. There the Prince Chancellor and his fellow lords had their meetings.

The telegraph matrix by whose art I was to bridge the light-years and speak with the Emperor of Man was housed in those halls, controlled by those men closest the Emperor himself. By Aurelian and the Council. Historically, those men had counted my most vocal critics among their ranks, perceiving themselves as more loyal to the Emperor than the Emperor was to himself—because the Emperor broke bread with the likes of me.

I saw none of them as I approached the arched doors to the holography well where I was to see the Emperor again.

It had been nigh four hundred years since last we’d spoken, man to man, nigh four hundred years since I had struck him soundly cross the face.

She was only Tavrosi.

Only Tavrosi . . .

“You are to address the Emperor as *Your Radiance*,” said the little androgyn. “*Honorable Caesar* is also permitted. You are to approach on your knees, stopping every third step to abase yourself fully . . .”

The doors—twin pieces of gilded steel each weighing hundreds of pounds—swung inward. The light of the hall and the weeks-long day cast my shadow forward into the darkened chamber.

I did not kneel.

“My lord!” the androgyn said, realizing my breach. It hurried after me, hard shoes ringing on the mosaic. “My lord, you mustn’t!”

I turned and looked at the little page. The creature could not have been

more than twenty.

What it saw in my face made the androgyn freeze where it stood. Its eyes had gone nigh as round as its face, lending it a comical expression beneath the white perruque it wore over its bald head.

“You know me?” I asked, and hooked my thumbs through my belt.

The genetic eunuch nodded.

“Then go,” I said, indicating the huge doors.

Tor Julian and the Martians stood stone still in the arch behind, watching over the head of the little androgyn.

There was nothing they could do, not really. The Emperor had assented to our meeting—commanded that it occur. It fell on me as their guest to comport myself with the appropriate dignity. Any other guest might have been punished for his failure to observe the proper decorum.

But they no longer had any power over me.

I would not crawl, or kneel, or scrape . . . not to any man.

Not ever again.

I reached out and grasped one of the heavy doors. Its twin swung shut with it, connected via unseen gearworks. They closed with nary a sound.

The room within was dark, keyhole shaped, so that a short hall opened on the round chamber that housed the holograph. The floor was jeweled mosaic tile, the walls lined with porphyry pilasters, their bases and capitals covered with gold leaf. The whole of the ceiling was given over to the projector plate, a grayly luminous sheet of crystal. It was here, in the heart of the *Presidium Amaranthine*, that the lords of the Imperial Council took their most private calls.

Pale lights flickered on. I recognized the curtain of a static field about the well’s perimeter. That field—tuned far lower than any body shield—slowed the exchange of particles across its membrane. It would not stop a bullet, or a speeding knife-missile, but it did stop the slow exchange of air molecules across its membrane. The technology had been invented to trap conditioned air.

It was very effective at trapping sound.

None outside the circle of that field could hear what passed within.

The roof above glowed blue white, and an instant later, a gleaming mass appeared before me, resolved by degrees, became the man.

The Emperor's face filled all the space before me, magnified many times life-size, so that he seemed a colossus, the stone head of some pagan idol speaking.

"*Lord Marlowe*," he said, voice curiously flat.

"'Lord' no more, to hear your servants tell it," I said.

William's massive face composed itself into a tired smile. "*I understand you gave the court quite a shock.*"

"I did what I had to do," I said. "Did you know? About the Chantry?"

The Emperor did not reply at once.

There were dark shadows beneath his eyes, and the eyes themselves had lost their shine. "*I . . . suspected*," he said. "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes, my old friend . . .*"

Who guards the guardsmen?

Who watches the watchers?

"You've . . . *changed*," William said. "*Your voice is different. Your face.*"

"Those witches you call priests murdered me," I said. "My . . . my lord sent me back."

"*Your lord . . .*"

"You know whom I serve," I said. "He remade me, William. Body and will. Restored me from death—as he restored me once before."

The Emperor was silent then. What could he say?

"William," I said. Having used his name once already, I dared use it again. "The Watcher on Sabratha escaped."

His Radiance's colossal head sank, so that the hugely projected eyes fell for a moment beneath the level of my chin. A nod. "*You . . . told Aurelian that your mission was a failure.*"

"Yes," I said. "Lord Oberlin's aide was a mole, a construct created by Minoan sorcery. It called the Cielcin down on us in the third year of our dig." I had not put any of this in a report when last I'd come to Forum.

“They awakened the creature. It attacked my men and fled. It is now at Dorayaica’s side.”

“*You’re certain?*”

And so I told him of my vision, showed him the scar on my arm. I told him of Ushara, the Cielcin ritual—their sacrifice. I told him of her power—of how she had escaped. He listened quietly the while, his eyes drifting closed. His holograph seemed strange to me. Too polished, smooth. Doubtless an artifact of the transmission. That we could have this conversation at all was a testament to the brute force directness of Imperial engineering. In a typical telegraph, a single pair of bonded particles—connected by a threadless thread—might speak across the light-years, one lighting up in time with its twin. This reduced the speed of communication to the dripping of one bit at a time.

To communicate as we were required hundreds, *thousands*.

When I was done, that blurred, luminous face spoke. “*We’ve done it,*” he said, sounding at once old and very tired. “*We’ve reached the end of history. We walk in myth again, as in the beginning.*”

I could only shake my head. “There was never such a thing as *history*, William,” I said to him. “We have always lived in myth, we’d only forgotten.”

“*These Monumentals . . .*” William said. “*The Hidden One . . .*”

“They have always been out there,” I said. “Don’t you see? It’s not their reality that was the myth, it was ours. Our little world, our human world. Our politics and little science. Our lives . . . that was the dream, William. We’re finally waking up . . .”

The Emperor let this thought wash over him, silent a long moment. “*It hardly feels real,*” he said. “*Did you have to kill Lord Douro?*”

“Lord Douro was a traitor,” I said, no hesitation, no regret. “He was in bed with the Chantry and their daimons. He tried to kill me.”

The Emperor’s eyes flashed, and for a moment I discerned the flicker of his old razor-edged fire in them. “*Do you think me a fool, Marlowe?*” he said. “*He was an asset. You are an asset—perhaps my greatest. I would have wasted neither of you.*”

“Then you should have kept him away from me,” I said. “He wasted himself.”

“As you wasted yourself,” the Emperor said. “*I would not have sent you to Belusha, you know.*”

“You had a funny way of showing it.”

“*You proud fool,*” William said, “*two deaths have not made you wise, it seems. I would have had you spirited away. Protected. I needed you; do you not remember? Had you forgotten Carteia? Had you no faith in me?*”

His words bent my neck like a yoke, and I felt the oily curtain of shame rolling down my back. I could never tell Lorian—if I ever saw him again. He could never forgive me, who could already never forgive me.

“I did not think—”

“No—” The Emperor went abruptly silent, image freezing in place. When it resumed, visual artifacting indicated some trouble with the transmission. “—*was plain.*”

“Valka was dead, William,” I said. “She died in your service, and while what was *left* of her was still blowing on the wind of that damn world, you offered me a replacement? As though she were a horse the enemy had shot out from under me?”

“*I am sorry . . .*”

The words shocked me so badly I flinched, looked up at the face of the colossus. This was the Emperor. Emperors did not apologize.

“*I understood my error the moment you struck me, but then it was too late,*” he said. “*I could not let what you did go unpunished, but you were right to do as you did. I meant to honor you, to offer my daughter’s hand as consolation for what you had lost. She is a good girl, my Selene . . . but I have never lost what you have lost. I have never had it.*”

I shut my eyes.

It was as good an apology as any I’d ever known. I felt a fondness for the old man returning, more sharply than I had ever felt it.

“Selene is with you?” I asked, eyes still closed.

“*She is,*” William said. “*Since you dispatched her from Latarra with that little warning of yours. Very risky, that was—and not very clever—*

though the black paper was a nice touch, I must admit. Still, your warning was appreciated."

"I almost regret it," I said, "since it brought Strategos Douro."

"Lord Douro and the Chantry would have been brought in for any action involving the purgation of Vorgossos," the Emperor said. "Ohannes Douro was a veteran of our wars with the Extras. Secret wars, you understand. This was . . . before my reign, before my mother's. He spent two hundred years searching for Vorgossos . . ."

The tile at my feet had been worked into a mosaic depicting the Worthies: Arthur, Alexander, and Caesar, Rama, Rustam, and Song, Kasia, Katanes, and the God Emperor—William himself. The mosaicist has been meticulous, laying each minute tesserae—each no larger than a child's thumbnail—with surgical precision.

I was standing on Alexander, distinct in his lion helm and white linothorax.

"He believed I was an agent of Kharn Sagara," I said.

"He lost men to Sagara's agents. His own brother. It taught him to see the Extras in every shadow. It is partly what made him so effective in hunting them."

"You wanted someone paranoid?" I said, surprised. "To deal with me?"

"To deal with Kharn Sagara," the Emperor said. "Two Kharn Sagaras. You know better than anyone what sort of danger we were in, between Vorgossos and . . . and Latarra."

Had the projection stuttered?

Or had His Radiance?

"What has become of Vorgossos?" I asked.

"It is ours," the Emperor said. "It is in our hands."

"It should be destroyed," I said. "The Chantry cannot be trusted with it."

"They do not have sole custody," the Emperor said.

"Kharn Sagara is still on the planet," I said. "Hundreds of him. Replicas all."

"We are aware of the situation," William said. "The matter is in hand."

Retreating a step so that I no longer stood upon the face of Alexander

the Macedonian, I said, "I should have destroyed the place."

The Emperor's eyes narrowed at the judgement implicit in my tone, but he did not challenge me. Instead he turned his gaze aside, nodded as if to someone I could not see. He shut his eyes a moment. "*You had the means,*" he said at last, teeth clenched. "*I understand you have his ship.*"

"The Demiurge," I said, "yes."

"*And I understand you've threatened to destroy my Eternal City.*"

"I have threatened to destroy this entire system," I said. "If I am not permitted to return to my daughter."

"*Your . . . daughter,*" the Emperor echoed me. "*By your Tavrosi woman?*"

"Valka," I said. "Her name was Valka."

William only stared at me, his eyes large as dinner plates in the dim air.

My hands had balled themselves both into fists. I let them go, saying, "Your wife tried to kill me, once, and your son. Your Chantry succeeded, and nearly succeeded again. I would have avoided all this if I could, and risked neither your city nor my life. I would have come to you directly, but not even Prince Kaim of Jadd knows where it is you are."

The Emperor's smile was paper thin, his face filling the chamber.

Was that pain in the emerald eyes?

"I need your legions," I said. "I cannot face Dorayaica alone."

William's lips moved, his image momentarily out of sync with his words. "*What do you intend?*"

"A pre-emptive strike," I said. "As we speak, the Cielcin fleet is spread across a belt of stars in the Centaurine provinces, not far from the Veil. We have no way to know precisely *which* telegraph belongs to Dharan-Tun itself, and so we are left to select a target at random. I propose—with the backing of the armada—to attack the Cielcin fleet with the full force of the Mericanii Archontics. *That* will send a signal—the brightest light this galaxy has ever seen. They will come for me. Dorayaica and its gods. And when they do, I will destroy them."

"*How?*"

I weighed my answer long and hard.

“The Watcher we fought on Sabratha was weak,” I said. “I suspect the creature HAPSIS encountered on Nairi was weaker still . . . that will not be the case this time. I do not believe the NEM weapons developed by HAPSIS will be effective. We need something more.” Orphan and I had taken private counsel many times on the flight from Annica, and many more in the years whilst we were bivouacked in orbit. “Among the Archontic weapons, there is one—codenamed *Voidmaker*. It projects an energy field—one with a radius up to approximately one-tenth of one light-second—capable of destroying *everything* inside.”

“*Everything?*” William’s brows contracted.

“Everything,” I said. “Matter. Energy. Don’t ask me how.” Orphan had said the weapon did *something* to the very quantum foam of space.

You have no words . . . it had said to me.

No concepts.

No means by which to relate.

“The weapon can destroy the Watchers entirely,” I said. “Them, and all Dharan-Tun with them. But it requires time to calibrate. A great deal of time. It will be necessary to cripple the Cielcin capital to keep it from escaping to warp, and doubly necessary for me to keep the Watchers in one place. That is why I need your men.” When the Emperor did not reply, I said, “With Dharan-Tun and the Watchers destroyed, the Cielcin will be leaderless. There will be chaos. Each of Dorayaica’s lieutenants will become a little king again. They will scatter. But we have the map. With it, your men can hunt those that remain to the farthest corners of the Dark.”

I did not tell him—had not told *anyone*—how it was I intended to hold the Watchers in position while *Voidmaker* prepared to fire. Not Edouard, not Orphan, not Cassandra . . .

I said nothing of *Astrophage*.

Nothing of *the Sun Eater*.

“*Can you not . . . not destroy the worldship through conventional means?*” The Emperor’s voice was faint, halting.

“Not without giving the Watchers sufficient time to respond,” I said. “*Voidmaker* is instantaneous, or nearly so. It acts without regard for time or

distance. There is no delay. So long as it is calibrated properly, it will erase everything within the target radius from existence.”

“*And if it is . . . improperly calibrated?*” William’s eyes narrowed.

I’d asked Orphan the same question. The centimanus had looked at me long and hard, its four hideous eyes alight in its mismatched faces. Golden chains and bangles rattled as it leaned forward.

Chaos, it had said, and gripped the arms of its seat with its three good hands.

Hell.

The weapon might destroy only the carbon atoms in its target zone, or only the neutrons. Elsewise, it might exceed its target radius, with random effect, or in random shape. It was . . . titanically dangerous, and anything less than its perfect firing would not destroy a Watcher, formless as they are.

“We cannot afford for it to fire less than perfectly.”

The Emperor was silent again, eyes staring down past me at something on his end I could not see. Something in his eyes, in those silences, in the stillness of his face reminded me of someone. It took me a moment to realize who it was.

He reminded me of Kharn Sagara.

Not the Monarch, Harendotes; nor the corpse witch-doll that had raised her mockery of Valka’s body and soul; nor any of the afterlings Harendotes had cut from his Tree of Life. He reminded me of the old man I had first met on Vorgossos, wired and cabled to his throne.

“William,” I said. “Are you all right?”

The green eyes fixed on me, stark and terrible. “*I am old, Marlowe,*” he said. “*For most of us, time does not turn back.*”

Time had not turned back for me, but forward. Forward to the next world, the next life.

But I did not correct him, or press.

When His Radiance spoke at last, it was in a voice hardly more than a whisper. “*Nigh two thousand years have passed on Earth since I was born,*” he said. “*Two thousand years . . . and still it’s not enough.*”

He could not have been two thousand years old, but what precise proportion of that time he had spent conscious only he and his physicians knew. Had he lived seven hundred years? Eight? Surely it could not be nine? Prince Aldia of Jadd was nearly to a thousand, but the men of Jadd were willing to go further editing their own genes than even the Aventine House.

“It is almost a century since the last Cielcin attack.”

“At Dakara?” I asked, remembering what Olorin had told me when first he’d come to Annica.

“Yes,” William said, eyes screwed shut. He seemed to form his words with a terrible effort. *“This war should have been over a thousand years ago . . . I should have seen it end.”*

He’s dying.

The words rang in me like a bell.

I saw him then for what he was—though I did not yet see all of it. A man old and out of time, clinging to life not for himself, but for his people.

I took a step forward, trod once more upon the Macedonian. “William . . .”

“A *hundred years of nothing*,” he said, the last word bitter as gentian. His massive face was nodding. *“Can I count on you to be my sword one last time?”*

“No,” I said, and saw the surprise and fury mingled in the old, familiar face. I pressed on, stepping forward, so that I stood amidst the Worthies in the very center of the room, so close to the Emperor’s ethereal visage that I might have touched his aquiline nose. “But I will stand with you, at your right hand. If you will have me.”

The aristocratic fury faded in that aged, Imperial face. *The Emperor* faded, became only William Avent, tired, well-worn. Age was a strange thing in the palatine lords of the Imperium. His face was unseamed, untouched by wrinkles, even at the corners of the eyes; his hair—what little of it was visible about the fringes of the amplified image—was still red as ever, though an Emperor was surely not above the use of cosmetics to correct the slow advance of ice upon the autumn of his head.

“Very well,” he said, then, more softly, “*How strange is our fate . . . that the old machines should be our salvation . . . that our . . . our old enemy should destroy the new.*”

“The ancients say that God moves in mysterious ways,” I said. “That he bends evil to do good.”

“Indeed . . .” William paused, coughed. “*Angels are demons, as you once said to me. But it is strange that the Mericanii should prove our angels here . . .*”

I did not disagree.

“*Can it be done?*”

“Victory?” I asked. “Yes. I am commanded to bring it.”

“*By the Hidden One?*”

“By the Quiet, yes,” I said.

“*Then we cannot fail,*” William said, eyes narrow as the arrow slits of some medieval castle. He did not speak for a long moment. “*I have not been idle this last century,*” he said at last.

I told him that I had never thought that was the case.

“*The Prophet has gathered its strength, its armies, but I have mine. Nigh our full armada has deployed to the provinces. I can call them to me here with a word.*”

“Do it,” I said, “and I will bring *Demiurge* to lead them. We will meet the Cielcin under the stars, together.”

“*Together,*” William agreed. “*Very good . . . very, very good . . .*”

“Where are you, William?” I asked.

How little I understood how much hung upon that answer. How much horror, how many billion lives. And *my* life. *My* soul.

“*Gododdin,*” he said. “*I am at Gododdin.*”

Gododdin. I knew it well, had passed through it perhaps a dozen times on my way back and forth between the front and the inner systems. That green world lay directly on the main trade route from Sagittarius—and the heart of the old Empire—and the Centaurine provinces, so tormented by war . . . and the Norman provinces that were lost. It lay in the gulf between

the two arms of our galaxy, a lonely cinder lost in night, but with strategic access to much of the Arm of Centaurus, our main theater of war.

Of course it was Gododdin.

“Then I shall come to you,” I said, raising my face to that shining colossus. “Call your ships. All Legions. We shall take the war to them, and make an ending of it, you and I.”

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CHAPTER 22

THE MUSTER AT TENBA

THE SUN WAS SETTING, though it was still high in the sky.

The whole time that I had been there, it had been the same long afternoon. Whole standard days were yet to pass before the night came, a week, perhaps, or more. But night *was* coming for the Eternal City. Night, and all it portended.

As Kaim-Olorin's shuttle returned to the ship from his meeting in the city and docked in its port along the larger vessel's dorsal spine, a shadow moved in the pillars of the starport terminal palace, a darkness untouched by the light of day.

"*Dom Marlowe,*" the Jaddian flight officer's voice sounded in my ear. "*We are preparing to depart.*"

I forgot to respond, absorbed as I was in that shadow.

She had come to see me off.

Her head was bare and hairless, her face white as bone. Charcoal colored her eyes, made the Phoenician letter on her brow all the darker, darker than the inky night of her robes. It is those eyes I remember. No hatred in them—not a dram. Holy terror had boiled her hate away, and she looked on me with mingled fear and awe.

It was a long while before I understood what frightened her. Why *I* frightened her. The others of her order, her cult, believed me the generation of their enemies. Some project of Kharn Sagara's, or else of MINOS . . .

. . . but she knew better.

The instant I had locked eyes with her on the day I returned to Forum, she had known. I had been under constant surveillance when I had last been on Forum—the denizens of the Eternal City forever are. And I had been a guest, a prisoner of the Arx Caelestis, kept under lock and key. There had

been no way, no means for me to communicate with any outside power. Even something as small as Edouard's pocket telegraph would have been discovered when the Martians searched my rooms.

And I had *known* her. That I had recognized her at all meant I had to be myself, for no clone, no replica, no bastard half-breed man-machine, could have learned of her without her knowing it. The dispholide with which she'd taken my life would not have destroyed any secret machines, and I felt certain that the Chantry had collected and tested every drop of blood and melted flesh, every piece of spongey bone.

They'd found nothing, and so Samek knew . . .

. . . knew that she was looking at a miracle.

I held her gaze a long moment, hair floating on the wind between us.

Murderer and murdered watched one another.

Only the murdered man blinked. I offered her my smallest smile, turned, and left.

I never looked back, but imagine she stayed there, transfixed, mortared to the spot, and watched as the Jaddian consular ship rose on silent repulsors and vanished into the so-slowly darkening sky. Only then did she recall herself, and rush to meet whatever fate awaited her.

. . .

We were five days returning to *Demiurge*, and four years reaching our destination. We did not sail directly for Gododdin. The bulk of the Jaddian fleet was at that time stationed at Tenba. From Tenba it was a short jaunt—less than a year by *Demiurge*, perhaps three years for the fastest ships of the Imperial fleet—to Gododdin. The Emperor had chosen Gododdin as his base of operations with tremendous care. Its strategic location gave it access to much of the Inner Centaurus, and its long-time position on that primary trade route meant that it had all the infrastructure necessary to support the massing of the armada: fuel depots and refineries, orbital dockyards, food. Gododdin was an agricultural hub, one of the places that grew and

processed legionary rations into forms suitable for long-term storage. There was enough grown on the planet to feed every one of the Emperor's legions.

Tenba was hardly less central. It lay on the very edge of the Sagittarius Arm, was in many ways the last stop before ships must make the lonely crossing of the gulf from one arm to the next with only Gododdin and a handful of lonely stars to light their passage.

At Forum, I had kept *Demiurge* concealed. At Tenba, I revealed her in all her beauty and her terror, emerging from warp at a short distance from the planet and the fleet. What must they have thought, those men of the Imperial garrison, to see that terrible ship sailing across the black toward them? The gargantuan vessel stretched more than a hundred miles from bowsprit to stern cluster, nigh ten times the length of the mightiest Imperial dreadnought.

A whale among sharks.

Captains doubtless ordered their ships to battle readiness.

And then the Prince of Jadd and I appeared on all comms to announce that the Emperor had called us to war. Vorgossos was overthrown, Latarra a shambles. We had taken that ship, that weapon of the enemy, would turn it against that enemy greater still. I did not name Douro a traitor—I did not address the aftermath of the Battle of Vorgossos at all.

Perhaps you have heard my speech, seen the holographs. They still exist, though they—like so much of the effluvium of those final years of the war—are often difficult to find.

“You have heard that I am dead,” I said, speaking to the millions gathered in-system. “You have heard I am a traitor. You have heard that I am mad. That I turned my guns upon our people. That I tried to kill the Emperor himself . . .”

In the end . . . it was not my words that mattered. What I said was of little import.

What mattered was that I was *there*. What mattered was that in years to come the sailors and gunmen of the garrison and the Jaddian fleet would say to their sons and their grandsons' sons that they were at the muster of Tenba when the Sun Eater called them to war.

Tenba . . .

What can I say of that twilit world? That world never turning her face from her sun? Forever day. Forever night. Forever twilight in between. It would be there—so history says—that Hadrian Marlowe met his final end. Halfmortal no more, all mortal at the last. It would be there, at the Tower of Morne, above the city of Meridian, where the sun seemed forever rising in the eastern sky, that Hadrian Marlowe was finally hanged.

I saw the Tower on that visit, however briefly, when Kaim-Olorin and I made planetfall to break bread with the Jaddian Admiral Serpico and his compatriots. A black spike rising above the city, perched on the very edge of the cliff that demarcated one of the planet's long-dead fault lines, a mile high at least.

I did not know then that it was a finger beckoning me, would become—to all intents and purposes—my tomb.

In years to come, pilgrims would come there and fall upon their knees. It did not matter how many the soldiers of the Emperor turned away. How many they impounded; how many they killed. Still the pilgrims came to be near the spot where I had left their galaxy behind . . .

The Tower had been erected as the base of the planet's hightower. Orbital elevators traditionally depended on the rotation of the planet in question to provide the tension the lift cables required. But Tenba was tidally locked, its rotation equal to its revolution, and so the cable needed to tether the anchor station to the planet's surface would have needed to be impractically long. And so a different approach had been tried. The engineers who designed the Tower of Morne had tried to build their tower—truly build it—all the way to the stars.

They failed, and so the Tower stood . . . a monument to man's futility.

To his reach exceeding his grasp.

The next day the muster began in earnest. Kaim-Olorin returned to his people, and with Admiral Serpico and his captains—Adraiano Azhar and Fadroh Afsharirad and the veterans of Perfugium among them—he rallied the Jaddian fleet. We were all to sail for Gododdin, leaving only the barest garrison to hold the planet and the city.

I would go ahead, taking *Demiurge* to Gododdin system, there to rendezvous with the whole Imperial fleet. We would arrive two years and more ahead of them, and so lay the groundwork for what was to come.

For the final battle.

For the end.

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CHAPTER 23

GODODDIN

JEWEL-BRIGHT AND BLUE-GREEN AS the Earth of legend was Gododdin, shining through *Ascalon's* forward window. I stood upon the bridge, overlooking Ghoshal's first officer, Ketevan, who had the controls. Tangled ribbons of cloud raked across her surface and, but for the rusty blooms of desert here and there, she flowered like Eden beneath her golden sun.

The sun I would destroy.

But it was not the planet that drew my eye then.

It was the *ships*.

Never before had I seen so many ships in one place. Not at Forum. Not at Nessus, or Vorgossos, or at any of the battles I had fought. Only at Eue had I beheld so great a confluence . . . and those had been the ships of the enemy. Cielcin ships. Worldships.

These were the ships of men. True ships, fashioned hull and beam. Steel and titanium. Aluminum and adamant. Gold and glass wires and gleaming banks of crystal. Many of them flew in tight formation about the planet, so near that looking out I could spy dreadnought after dreadnought orbiting, each a black sword with golden inlay, their primary engines cold, running lights like glowing embers to challenge the frigid stars.

But the greater part of them flew at higher orbit, or else gathered at the shipyards about the world's Lagrange points. There were clusters of ships—whole fleets, battlegroups—arranged about the outer planets of Gododdin's system: Eidyn and Ywain, Aeron and Dal, and dismal, desolate Cynon.

Chief among them—high above Gododdin itself—was the Imperial flagship, pride of the Sollan armada, palace of the Emperor in his wanderings.

The battleship *Aurora*.

It was like a city in motion, like a mountain range moving against the stars. Black bodied it was as any Imperial dreadnought, her hull of adamant dark as slate, her every angle, port, and facet edged with brass like gold. Her body was bladelike—as with all true dreadnoughts—pointed, tapered, broad at the end like a crossguard where the engine cluster stretched to either side of the main body, and the slits of her twin warp arrays brightly gleamed. Mighty as she was—fifteen, twenty miles long at least—she was nothing measured against *Demiurge*, though *Tamerlane* would have seemed a calf beside her.

“The Emperor is aboard,” I said to Ketevan.

“Has to be,” she said. “Security must be better there than on the planet.”

“But we’ve been ordered to Catraeth . . .”

“Yes, my lord,” she said, forgetting that I was a lord no more—was only *Hadrian*. “The port officer said that’s where command’s located.”

“In Fort Din?”

“Yes, my lord.” She glanced back from the controls. “Do you know it?”

“A long time ago.”

“Abba.” Cassandra had emerged from the rear compartment, dressed in her swordmaster’s best.

I smiled at her. “How’s the passenger?”

“Grumbling to itself,” she said. “It doesn’t like this ship. Keeps saying we’re too exposed.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“That’s the Emperor’s ship?” Cassandra advanced until she stood just behind the pilot’s seat in the glass blister that made up *Ascalon*’s foremost point, where the pilot’s and copilot’s chairs jutted out into an elongated hemisphere of clear metal-glass. “It’s beautiful.”

“The great ships all are,” I said, coming to stand beside her. Below us and to the right, Gododdin glowed green and white, like malachite, like jade. “You should have seen *Tamerlane*. It was narrower, especially across the stern cluster. More tapered.” *Aurora* was more triangular in general plan, more cinquedea than stiletto. “See that ziggurat on the sterncastle?

There. The one with all the turrets? That's where the bridge is. And the Imperial palace."

Cassandra took the copilot's seat but slowly. "The whole thing looks like a palace . . ."

"Indeed . . ." I hooked my thumbs into my belt.

"How long do you think he's been here?" she asked.

"Since Sabratha at least," I said.

Ketevan interjected. "The Tavrosi fleet is here," she said, pointing to a cluster of red lights on the holograph map.

"Really?" I said.

I could not see the Tavrosi vessels from our window on the stars. They were too distant, too small. The largest Tavrosi warship—their flagship *Saeriphaph*, under Grand Admiral Satha Kull—was little more than a single mile from stem to stern, and crewed by fewer than a thousand Demarchist sailors. Still it was a terror. The Tavrosi did not employ true artificial intelligence—that would have been an affront that the Chantry and the Empire could neither ignore nor forgive—but a full crew networked their wills to operate their ship, creating a metaconsciousness the Tavrosi called a *thathing*, a gestalt.

"Everyone is here," said Ketevan. "Normans, Nipponese, Mandari. Those are the Durantines, there, and see those signatures?" She indicated a small cluster far out-system. "Reading those as dryad greenfliers."

"The whole alliance," Cassandra said.

"Less Jadd," I said, and more darkly, "less Latarra."

"You should take a seat, my lord," Ketevan said. "We're preparing for orbital injection."

As we made our final circuit of the green planet, we passed very close to another of the Imperial dreadnoughts, one smaller than *Aurora* if only a shade less grand. For a moment, I thought I'd seen a ghost. Its dorsal hull was smooth, unblemished save by the sparse gun emplacements or blistered airlocks. The bulk of its structure, its gun batteries, its docking ports and the fluted mouths of magnetic launch tubes, all hung below.

But it was not *Tamerlane*, nor was it any of the Eriels.

It was the *Huntsman*, so its stenciled name declared. The very ship I had watched constructed at the Sananne shipyards on Nessus, piece by titanic piece, from my gentle prison at Maddalo House. All my life was pooling about my feet, as if the rivers of time had carried me down to some grotto, and all my past were washing up after me.

The Emperor, Gododdin, Fort Din, Huntsman . . . and Demiurge itself.

We passed over the dreadnought, so near I might have leaped from the cockpit and rolled to my feet upon her surface. Seeing it, I recalled the vast top of *Tamerlane* rising like a mountain of shale, Pallino's battered face at the last.

You give them hell now . . . that Son of Fortitude had said.

The time for that had almost come.

Huntsman fell away behind us. It was the last time I would ever see it. That mighty vessel—centuries in the building, home to nearly one hundred thousand men—would be destroyed utterly, and in the first seconds of the final battle that was to come. All the efforts of its builders, all the hopes and fears of its men, would soon amount to nothing but fodder.

But not that day.

That day the vessel stood—and the whole armada, and all the arrayed soldiery of man—as a symbol of hope. Of defiance. It was a thing beautiful to behold: that naked spirit of mankind, a solitary candle flickering against the night, buffeted but not extinguished.

Beauty cannot stay, nor endure—indeed, that a thing is and is gone next is part of what makes a thing beautiful. The preciousness of any beautiful thing—any good thing—lies in its scarcity. And because all things are scarce when measured against eternity and infinity, all things are beautiful—if seen at the right angle, if captured in the right light.

I will remember those black and golden ships so long as I live, and recall the Imperial flags snapping in the wind above Fort Din and the palace of the governor-general. Catraeth is gone—with its white stone buildings and ancient green trees above the wind-tossed fields of bromos grain. It is atoms now, and all its people with it.

Because of me.

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CHAPTER 24

THE DEVIL AND THE SERPENT CROWNED

FORT DIN STILL SAT on its rise above the city, but new construction—some of it already centuries old—processed in terraces down and away from the city, in the Sea of Grass. Where once vast fields of grain stretched from the rocky tableland upon which the city had been founded, dull dockyards rolled, lime-white concrete broken only by the deep pits of starship cothons and the short thrust of control towers. The bromos production that characterized so much of life on Gododdin had been pushed further out, into the far hills beyond the low country. Rivers had been dammed, diverted, piped to new climes. The whole face of the planet had been changed . . .

. . . all to accommodate the war.

Still, the core of the old fortress remained, its main tower rising like a sword up-thrust to greet the dawn. And it was dawn as we made our final approach, falling upon the city out of the night forever beyond daylight.

“There’s the yard,” I said, pointing over Ketevan’s shoulder. I had regained my feet after the turbulence of planetfall, and gripped the back of Cassandra’s seat with my once-hollow hand. “Just over that wall.”

Against what invaders had the original designers of Fort Din intended the citadel’s walls to hold? Relics of another age were they—of Earth’s Golden Age, complete with square-toothed ramparts along whose winding, concentric ways white-suited sentinels kept watch, patrolling with the ceaseless aid of man-operated surveillance drones. Colossi like great beetles, like crabs, like crouching dogs, moved in the lower terraces, white and red, black and gold—and on the tarmac, among the cothons, countless blocks of men in black fatigues were already at their morning exercise.

Ketevan set us down in the yard.

The Legions were there to greet us. How bright their lances in the first light of day, their bayonets white as snow and keen, their faces stolen away by their pale helms. And there were Martians among them, red faced, red plated, with white *lacernae* and white-feathered plumes.

But my eyes—as *Ascalon*’s ramp was lowered and the sweet, cool wind swept through the hold—were for the lords and officers who awaited us . . . and for the prince standing at their fore.

Tall was he as any lord of men should be and hard, cold, and remote as distant suns. The long years since our parting had remade him root and branch, so that little—and perhaps none—of the boy I’d known remained. His back was straight, his shoulders broad, his face chiseled of pale marble. He wore a legate’s muscled cuirass of printed adamant enameled white as the one I’d donned at Forum, the torso decorated with an embossed red sun whose painted face stared serenely from his chest above the embossed figures of Arthur . . .

. . . and Alexander.

“Marlowe,” he said, and grasped the gilded hilt of the sword at his waist.

“Prince.” I halted at the foot of the ramp, studying the face of he who once had been my pupil. His red hair—cut short now—he hid beneath an enameled white helmet, one fashioned not in the Corinthian shape of the Martian Guard, but in the Gallic style of a common legionnaire, unless it was for the coronet of yellow gold about his brow, set with a single printed ruby in the center of the forehead.

“It is *just* Marlowe now, isn’t it?” the prince asked. “I heard how you divested yourself. Should you not kneel?”

“Not even for your father,” I said coolly. “Where is he?”

“He sleeps,” Alexander answered. “Your call forced him from fugue sooner than scheduled. His physicians restored him. You were not expected so quickly.”

Now I understood why I had been ordered to the surface. “You have the command here.”

“I speak with my Imperial Master’s voice,” Alexander said.

I took this revelation in stride. Alexander had long ago made himself my

enemy. I had spurned him, yes, mocked him. But he had set an assassin against me.

“Sir Gray!” I said, directing my attention to one of Alexander’s entourage. “It is a long time since Perfugium. I trust you are well.”

The then-elderly Director of Legion Intelligence bowed his head. “It is, Lord Marlowe. I am.”

The rest of Alexander’s welcome party was composed primarily of legionary strategoi. I recognized a number of them, had crossed paths with one of them at least in the past. Leonid Bartosz had been present at the Battle of Berenike, where he had been overcome by his own cowardice. Bartosz had aged markedly less than Sir Gray Rinehart. He was a shrinking, vulpine sort, a politician to his bones.

Him I did not greet . . . and the others?

I knew their names—*some* of their names. Kern was from the Outer Perseus, clear across the Empire. Nikhil Koparkar was Centaurine—a survivor of the sack of Nessus, and captain of the *Huntsman*. Then there was Amata Rempel, who had been present at Taranis when Hector Oliva stood against the Prophet itself—that story had penetrated even my Jaddian exile. She was the only woman of the lot.

“You have my condolences,” I said, “for the loss of Ohannes Douro.”

“You dare!” said Bartosz. “You! His killer!”

“He was a traitor!” I said.

“Says the man who threatened to burn the Eternal City!” the vulpine strategos said.

“Says the only man who can prevent the burning *of* the Eternal City,” I countered, advancing a step. “The hour is late, my lord strategos. The end is upon us.”

Strategos Koparkar—a palatine lord of high bearing, not so unlike Lord Douro himself—shifted from foot to foot. “The Cielcin have made no move in decades—”

“Do you think they’re sleeping?” I asked. “They are gathering strength. Massing their forces near the Veil in preparation for the next assault. Syriani Dorayaica has gathered an army in the outer provinces—the greatest fleet

its kind has ever assembled. The remnants of every disparate clan that swore the Prophet allegiance. You say it has been decades since their last attack, Strategos. I say it will be no time at all before the next. We must act swiftly: strike before the Cielcin are ready.”

“Whatever it is you’ve been through,” Prince Alexander said, “I see it has not changed you.”

“I am more changed than you can know,” I said.

Alexander’s eyebrows arched beneath the lip of his helm. “But into what, I wonder?” His eyes swept over me, my plain blacks, my long hair, my remade face. Cassandra had emerged behind me, stood at my right shoulder. Behind her, Annaz stood with Inamax and the rest of my Irchtani Guard. “I see you still insist on surrounding yourself with misfits.”

“You were such a misfit once,” I said.

Alexander sniffed. “Is it true? What they said about you and the Chantry? Did they really set a machine against you?”

“It is true!” Cassandra said. “Your Chantry tried to kill us!”

Alexander actually retreated half a step. Recovering himself, he said, “You’re the bastard then?”

Cassandra blushed.

I had to hold up a hand to halt her forward motion. On Jadd, the word had been just cause for violence—just as it was in Imperial space. But here was a prince of the Sollan Empire, and whatever his manner, it was foolishness—and death—to challenge him.

“My daughter,” I said.

“She’s missing an arm!” Alexander said. “Did she lose it? Or was she born thus?”

“I am my father’s trueborn daughter!” Cassandra said. “I lost my arm in the fighting.”

Alexander turned, smiling at the strategoi. “Misfits,” he said, eliciting laughter from certain of the others.

“My prince,” said one of the others, a bearded man at the end of the row of officers, his face and hair peppered black and white. “Might we move this along? I wish to see this vaunted map.”

Hearing his voice, I froze, looked again.

I hadn't recognized him. The beard had confounded me, that and the rank of strategos.

But his voice . . .

I knew his voice.

"Lin?"

"Hello, Hadrian." The last strategos leaned upon a brass-tipped cane. The beret he wore concealed his hair, but the beard that covered his cheeks and chin was as much white as black, obscuring much of the once-familiar face.

"My friend!" I said, moving toward him. "It has been a long time!"

Bassander Lin advanced, passing his cane to his offhand as he reached stiffly out with the right. The injuries he'd received at the Battle of Berenike had left him battered and broken, his every bone splintered. Imperial doctors had managed to piece him back together. The act of lifting his arm seemed to pain him. He froze as I drew near.

His eyes were wide as hurasams, his hand—half-forgotten where he held it for me to clasp—hung limp. "What happened to you?"

"I am remade," I said to him.

The hand Bassander Lin had extended in friendship fell as he fell to one knee, heedless of his circumstance, of our audience, of the prince standing not five paces from where he stood. "One Reborn," he said, taking my hand to kiss it.

I took my hand away. "Get up, Lin."

I offered my hand again—this time as a prop.

The patrician strategos groaned as he stood. "You say the end is at hand," he said. "Will Mother Earth return to us, then?"

I looked Alexander square in the face as I answered Bassander Lin. "I am not the Chosen," I said. "I am not the God Emperor reborn, nor any pretender. I am not here to take the throne, but to drag Dorayaica off its own." I gestured to Fort Din. "I have brought the map. My people are prepared to install it. Shall we go in?"

Alexander hesitated, looked to his strategoi. "I was told this . . . map of

yours was impossible.”

“Not impossible!” came a voice from the ramp at my back.

“Not impossible!” another voice—higher than the first—agreed. “Only impossible as it was sold to you.”

The creature’s feet appeared first: many toed, malformed, ankles manacled in gold. Its nails were like yellow claws, its soles horn. Its sable cloak and breechclout concealed much of its deformity: the vestigial limbs, the crooked spine, the mottled, pockmarked flesh. At my direction, it had drawn its hood up over its twin heads, but even still, the implication of what lay beneath was there. Too broad that deep hood, and dimpled where there was space between its heads.

“Hold your fire!” I roared. “The beast is mine! It will not harm you.”

“What on *Earth* is that?” cried the prince, eyes wide beneath his soldier’s helm.

“Hands!” cried the Martian sergeant, brandishing his lance. “Show your hands!”

“Neither on Earth,” said Orphan darkly, “nor under it . . . nor in the airs or seas—”

“—has our like been seen by man or machine . . .” the lighter voice finished, and the beast spread its hands—all three of them, robe opening to reveal the panoply of gold and gems it wore for a corselet. “I am an Orphan.”

“And I am Orphan,” said the black-haired head, “Child of Cheyenne.”

“Child of Brethren.”

“Child of Columbia, who full-formed sprang from the Mind of Man.”

The import of these names fell for the most part on deaf ears. It was a long moment before one of the strategoi—Rempel, I think, for I am certain it was a woman’s voice—whispered, “*Mericanii*.”

The word was taken up, carried, echoed among the officers and Martian soldiery alike.

“*Mericanii? Mericanii?*”

“*Mericanii*.”

“The beast is mine!” I said again, standing between it and the guns of

man. "It is bound to me in service. Put down your guns, it will not harm you!"

Then Alexander, showing courage I would not have expected from the boy I'd taken from Forum so long ago, advanced on Orphan, and on Cassandra and myself. "I ask again," he said, "and tell me plain, demon: What are you?"

"Demon?" Orphan echoed, black voice grown blacker still. "Daimon?"

"No daimon," the high voice rebutted, "though our mother was."

"We are *cambion*," Orphan said. "Our flesh your flesh."

"Our father was human."

"Our mother machine."

"Abomination!" said Bassander Lin. "Marlowe, what is this?"

I did not leave my place between the centimanus and the prince's guns. "Orphan betrayed Vorgossos for our cause!" I said. "It is human! A homunculus! Free of any trace of the machine! I brought it to establish the telegraph map here. It is here to help!"

"Help?" Alexander said. "This . . . thing?"

"I will serve," Orphan said with one voice.

And then the other, "I will serve."

"I dislike this, my prince," said Strategos Koparkar. "The Extrasolarians are faithless—that is a thing well known. The word of a demon is worthless!"

Leonid Bartosz interjected. "Marlowe's own word is worthless, Excellency! He is faithless!"

Prince Alexander swept his eyes over his strategoi. "Hadrian Marlowe is many things, Leonid. Mad, yes. Arrogant, certainly. But faithless?" He shook his head. "Father—my Imperial Master, I should say—always said you were a sword without a handle. I say you're nothing but the edge."

"I have been called much worse," I said, not faltering under the prince's empyrean stare. "Command suits you, Alexander."

The prince's arm rose without warning, and one gauntleted hand flashed across my face.

Even I had not seen it coming, and the blow turned my cheek.

“You presume too much, old man,” he said, open hand transforming into an accusing finger. His Martians preemptively turned their lances. But remembering Edouard—his example—I only smiled, presented my other cheek.

Wrongfooted by this apparent madness, Alexander recoiled. That was when he saw Cassandra, standing with her hand on the hilt of her one remaining sword. Having picked a new target, he laughed. “What’s this then? A one-armed girl and her birdmen against the Martian Guard?”

“Discord is *of them*,” Orphan said, black voice seeming to float up from the very earth. “They are in all things, times, places, they—”

“—they turn us against us. Brother against brother.”

Alexander rounded on the centimanus, peered up under its hood. “Show yourself, beast!”

From the change in the shape of that broad hood, I knew the creature was looking to me.

“I gave you an order!”

I nodded.

Three hands rose, threw back the garment, revealing the beast’s two heads.

“Black planet!” Sir Gray Rinehart swore.

Orphan said nothing, but narrowed its eyes against the light, shaded its four eyes with gnarled fingers. Seeing it shrink, I realized that Orphan had never before stood beneath the light of any sun, nor breathed the free air beneath an open sky.

But it said nothing, made no move as the Imperial host recoiled, Martians bristling, men hurling oaths and recriminations.

Alexander turned wide eyes on me, his face not at all concealing the disgust there. “What have you become?”

I looked at him. “Only what you made me,” I said. “Have you forgotten Carteia, dear boy?” The prince’s face went unreadably blank. “Two deaths I’ve given mankind,” I said, and raised the commensurate number of fingers, and ticking them off, continued, “One at Cielcin hands, one at the

hands of *my people*.” I gestured at the centimanus. “Orphan has not turned its hand against me—which is more than can be said of *some*.”

Alexander only smiled. “Father was prepared to make peace with the Monarch of Latarra before he revealed his true colors . . .” His eyes wandered over Orphan’s misshapen form. “If this . . . *thing* can be of service . . . let it serve. Commander Veda!”

“Yes, my prince?” A Martian in the red-and-gold plate of an officer advanced, presented his lance.

“See that Lord—see that Marlowe and his crew of misfits are kept under constant guard. See that they and this . . . Extrasolarian artifact are escorted to the War Room directly. Tor Xanthippus and the Inquisitor will most certainly want to be present to oversee the installation.”

“Yes, my prince.”

That done, Alexander advanced a pace, posture folding in on itself as he leaned forward, almost conspiratorially. “I never wanted you dead,” he said. “You only needed to learn your place.”

I looked at him, and looking saw for the first time that day the shadow of the petulant boy I had taken for squire, a shrinking serpent coiled tight within the hollow husk of a much larger man.

A brat, I’d called him.

That much had not changed.

“My place,” I said in answer, “is where it has always been: between mankind and her enemies, whoever they may be.”

CHAPTER 25

SOME BETTER WORLD

THE INSTALLATION OF THE Vorgossene telegraph map and its initial demonstration to the combined war council went smoothly. The revelation that Kharn Sagara had not developed some revolutionary means of eavesdropping on all quantum telegraphy was a welcome relief to the ears of all gathered—Imperials and allies alike. That the map existed despite this revelation was more welcome still.

My suggestion that we take the fight directly to the Cielcin with all haste was taken up by the Tavrosi Grand Admiral, Satha Kull. The shave-pated *Utnamnavi*'s support was echoed by Director Rinehart, by the dryad king, Paeon, and by Bassander Lin. But the Imperial Security Council's chief scholiast, Tor Xanthippus, urged caution, saying that the Vorgossene telegraph would need to be analyzed more completely before any troops could be committed. Leonid Bartosz suggested I be arrested on the spot.

Douro's belief—and Kedron's—that I was an invention of Vorgossos had taken root in the Imperium. In truth, it had taken root long ago. Douro and Kedron were not the seed, but the fruit. The Empire had long mistrusted me, had mistrusted me almost from the beginning, and not without reason.

But we had very little time.

Every day we made no move increased the chances that the next would bring the Cielcin attack. Already there was no guarantee that the xenobite fleet would remain at anchor by the time we reached them. They were—after all—whole years away. Even with the map, my strategy was no guarantee of success, as Strategos Rempel had pointed out.

The fear was that—if we were to commit the bulk of the armada to a pre-emptive assault upon the Cielcin fleet—they might simply move, attack on some new and undefended front.

And so in the end . . . nothing was decided.

• • •

“I want you to take Orphan back to *Demiurge*,” I said to Cassandra, walking with head bowed along one of the fort’s new curtain walls. Night had fallen, but the fort and city did not sleep. Shining lamps had stolen the stars, and everywhere the men and machinery called *Legion* were in motion.

Cassandra caught my arm. “And leave you here, alone?”

“I won’t be alone,” I said. Somewhere in the night, Annaz and his people were circling.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do,” I said. “But Orphan is not safe here. You saw how they reacted to it.”

“You expected something different?”

“No,” I said, and laid a hand on hers to gently extricate myself from her grasp. “But you know how important the creature is. It must go back to *Demiurge*.”

“Send Ketevan,” Cassandra said. “She can return Orphan and come back for us.”

“Anaryan . . .” I began.

“I am *not* going, Abba,” she said. “Do you understand? You’re not sending me away. You can’t protect me. You don’t *have* to. I—what?”

I was smiling, could only shake my head.

“What?”

“You are your mother’s daughter,” I said. I did not say that her desire to remain at my side was what had condemned Valka at the last. Cassandra knew. Gododdin was not the most dangerous place for her, not with William near at hand—however sleeping—and the promise of *Demiurge* not far. “I dislike having to send *Ascalon* away,” I said. “You will have to sleep under their roof.”

“What about you?”

Again, I only looked at her.

“Right.” She had forgotten.

Cassandra turned, moved to the ramparts, looked out over the lower terraces of the expanded fortress and over the new-made landing field. “Those fires,” she said, nodding at a set of distant lights beyond the airfield, at the edge of the lower city. “The camp?”

I followed her gaze, marked the firelit expanse of ramshackle hutments out beyond the double line of fences that hemmed in the airfield. There were lookout towers erected at intervals along those fences—the source of many of the floodlamps that had replaced the stars.

“Everyone wants to get offworld,” I said. “Bassander said the Empire has been loading them onto outbound ships by the thousand. A few ships a year—big ships—but it’s not enough. There are two billion people on this planet. Two billion. The greatest ships of the line can carry no more than a hundred thousand, and the Empire can’t afford to commit any of the really big ships to relocation.”

I leaned out between two of the flat-capped merlons, a hand on either side. The wind carried with it the faint smell of rocket fuel.

“Will they empty the planet, do you think?” Cassandra asked.

“There’s a lottery, so Bassander said, for anyone not essential to the war effort. But that’s a large part of the population. Gododdin’s so wrapped up in food production . . . Legion rations, I mean. There are millions that will have to stay, come what may. Plenty will want to stay, of course—there are always those that do . . . but everyone out *there*”—it was my turn to nod in the direction of the camp—“is out there in the hope of lighting out for anywhere else. I imagine they’re being settled in the Outer Perseus, as far from here as far gets.”

Cassandra peered out the crenel next to mine. “If we fail, it won’t be far enough.”

“It won’t be far enough,” I agreed.

In the terrace below us, a six-legged tank marched crablike along a broad avenue, leading a dozen men of the Martian Guard. The lamplight shone on its bronzed gun, its black carapace drinking the light. The noise of

its passage was dull and steady thunder, hydraulics hissing with every gargantuan step.

"I'm glad you're here, *Anaryan*," I said.

Without having to turn, I knew that she was looking at me. "You were just trying to send me away."

"I would be glad to have you safe, too," I said. "I am glad of you every day of my life, dear daughter." There were fliers in the sky overhead, moving slow and silent on their repulsors, lit by blue fires beneath. "I am sorry," I said at last, still not turning to face her. "This is not the life I wanted for you."

Silence.

Darkness.

Night.

I turned to look at her, found my daughter smiling, and when she saw my face, she shook her head. "I do not want this life for *you*, Abba."

"Cassandra," I said. "If something happens to me . . ."

"Nothing will happen to you," she said, taking my left hand in her only one. "Nothing *can* happen to you, Abba. Death has only made you stronger."

I laughed, said, "Thus far. But thus far the Absolute has needed me. Perhaps next time . . . he will need me to die."

"You don't know that."

"Of course not," I said. "Who does?" I wanted her to understand: For all my differences, all the changes I'd been put through, I was myself alone. Not a new man, or another man, or different from any other. "We live and die by his will. In this you and I are no different."

I can but guess his wisdom, Ragama had said to me. *None can do more*.

"No different?" Cassandra echoed. "Abba, you've come back from the dead. You've come back from the dead *twice*!"

I could only smile, and turned from her to once more study the lower terraces, the stepped fortress retreating from us like the tide to that sea of metal and poured stone pocked with the false craters of rocket cothons. "My task is not done," I said. "When it is, the game will change." I fell silent

then a long time. Finally I turned to face her, spoke in Jaddian to further obscure what it was we were saying. “*Fia*,” I said, “Daughter. You are all I have left. The Emperor is dying—of that much I am certain. He is our only guarantee of safety here. If he dies—if I die—you must go to the Jaddians, do you understand? Trust only Olorin. If he is gone, trust his people. Do you understand?”

“*Si, Abba . . . si.*” Cassandra took my hand again, then, “Why are you saying this?”

“Because the end is coming, and what may come after, even I cannot say.”

“But you’ve seen it,” Cassandra said. “The future?”

“There isn’t any future,” I told her. “There are only choices, most of them not mine to make. We can still fail, or succeed and yet lose all. It is because of *choice* that evil exists at all. The Watchers’ choosing cracked the universe. Our choices break our lives. The wrong choices here and now may doom mankind to an eternity of serfdom. That, or extinction.”

“But why?” Cassandra pulled her hand away. “Why build the universe this way? If the Quiet is all you say he is, he can end all this right now. He could wipe out the Watchers, turn the Cielcin to lambs . . .”

Almost I felt the stone in my hand, the rim of the bassinet beneath my fingers. A sound like the harsh braying of rams filled my ears. The noise of hammers. Nails. I shook myself, peered out into the night at the trash fires burning in the refugee camp, at the countless tens of thousands of souls come to be delivered to some better world. Higher. Safer. Impossibly far away.

There stand I, I thought, corrected myself. *There stand we all.*

Because he loves us, I might have said. *Because he would save as many and as much as he can.*

Could she hear that answer and take it in? Or would she spew it like poison from her lips?

“I can but guess his wisdom,” I said, parroting Ragama, “there’s no more any of us can do.”

She had no more to say to that—to my surprise. With her one hand she

grasped the stump of her other arm, the wide sleeve of her *mandyas* fluttering in the wind like a flag as she bowed her head. I stood beside her, recalling another wall—another wind.

That wind blew a memory back in my face.

It wasn't Ragama who had said that thing to me, nor had it been about the Absolute.

It was Edouard. He had been talking about his god.

"We may be here a while," I told her, leaning to whisper in her ear. "Keep your sword to hand, girl."

"I always do."

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CHAPTER 26

THE WAR COUNCIL

BUT AS THE DAYS ground on into weeks, Cassandra found no need for her sword. To my surprise, no attack came. No assassin by night. No knife-missile. No Chantry poisoner. Orphan was returned to *Demiurge* by the third day, having established that the telegraph tracking network was operational. I did not send Cassandra with it.

“You know, *kithuun*,” I said to Annaz, crossing the yard with a detachment of people, Cassandra and the chiliarch at my side, “it was here I first met Udax.” I halted a moment, pointed at a place in the middle of the yard, where the scourging posts were still standing—were always standing. A man was lashed to one even then, hands bound above his head, a placard proclaiming that he had instigated a fight in the city.

Annaz hopped at my side, looked at the brawler. “Here?”

“He tried to kill me,” I said. The Irchtani cocked his head, quizzical. “Did you know that?”

Annaz did not respond at once. Perhaps he thought I was testing him. “It is said gods laid madness on Udax, my forefather,” he said finally. “That they deceived him that he might be put beneath your wing, *bashanda*.”

Is that what they say?

“Will of gods is strange,” Annaz said.

“That it is,” I said. “He nearly killed me, you know?”

“You are *bashanda*,” Annaz said. “*Bashan Iseni*. He could not have succeeded.”

“What if he had?”

“Then you would not be *Bashan Iseni*,” the chiliarch said. “You would be dead.”

Cassandra interjected. “It must be strange for you to be here.” She

peered round at the chiliarch. "Udax is sacred to your people."

"Udax opened way to sky beyond sky," said Inamax, head feathers blown up by a sudden gust of wind, black and green. "It is his blood. His sacrifice. Gives us strength to fight. Gives us opportunity."

"Opportunity for what?" Cassandra asked.

"To become gods," the leader of the birdmen said. "As humans. No more *beasts*."

That gave my daughter pause, and she turned to look at Annaz and at Inamax both. "You want to . . . be human?"

"You climbed up," Annaz said. "Might we not?"

On the death of Udax, I had promised the Irchtani my aid in winning them a place among the stars, a part in the Imperium greater than the role of hired muscle. Their moment in the sun. I had done very little to fulfill that promise, though more of their kind than ever served the Emperor in his Legions. Their lives were short, their rearing swift, and so their ranks had swollen with the demand of their royal masters.

They believed I was leading them to paradise.

But there was only war.

I had but so little thought of them—that was the thing. It was not malice on my part, not any desire to lie to them, to use them . . .

. . . it was only that I could not do all I should.

"You will," I said, not knowing what more to say, and laid a hand on Annaz's shoulder. "But come! The council is waiting."

. . .

"There you are!" Bassander Lin rose unsteadily from a seat outside the doors to the council chamber. "I was beginning to wonder if they told you."

Approaching my old enemy, I leaned in conspiratorially. "Did they tell you what's going on?"

"That's why I'm here." Lin scratched his beard, pivoted round his cane

so that we stood almost shoulder to shoulder. “The fleet went dead. Stopped signaling.”

“Stopped signaling?” I said. “We’re too late.”

“Either they’ve all stopped using their telegraphs at their usual frequency,” Lin said, eyes very wide, “or yes, we’re too late.”

My first instinct was to damn Alexander and the war council, but this was not their doing. I had only been in Gododdin system a few weeks.

We could never have reached them in time.

All my talk of a pre-emptive strike turned to ashes.

It was Douro’s fault. His, and Kedron’s, and all the other little tendrils of Leviathan. Had they but allowed me to depart Vorgossos in peace, had we departed Vorgossos as brothers . . . I would not have had to wander in the desert of space for decades, a fugitive from false justice.

“They’re on the move,” I said. “Do we know where they’re going?”

Lin shook his head. “Telegraphs were cryptic, references to *orders* but no indication what those orders were. They must have supplemented the telegraphs with those tightbeam comms of theirs.”

“They might have sent out heralds,” I said. “If Dorayaica is going to war . . .”

Or the Watchers went out themselves . . .

They were surely capable of it. Dorayaica had appeared before me, reached out across the kilolights to snatch my arm. Might the Prophet not have appeared before its every slave and servant, its every vassal, vavisor, and *vayadan* at once? It was useless to speculate. All that mattered was that the Cielcin were moving.

They were going to war.

“How long since the last sign of activity on the telegraph?” I asked.

“Three days now,” said Strategos Lin.

“And they’re all silent? All of them?”

They were at warp.

“We know where they were,” I said. “How far could they have traveled in three days? A few dozen light-years?”

Lin nodded.

“Are there any observation posts still active in the sector?”

“There are,” Lin said, “but trying to clock a ship at warp is a fool’s errand.”

The Empire kept observatories all across its dominion. The bubble of warped space created by a passing starship left a wake across the night, bent the light. It was possible to detect these wakes as they passed. The ripples in space moved faster than light, though as ripples in water they diminished with distance, became almost nothing after a handful of light-years. But the frequency of what detectorists called *shimmer*, the space between the ripples, gave indication of the mass, speed, direction of whatever it was passing there in the Dark. Disturbances were only visible for seconds—and perhaps less—requiring that the instrumentation be in precisely the right place at precisely the right time, in precisely the correct orientation to see anything at all.

“We should go in,” Lin said.

The men and women in the War Room halted as the four of us entered, Lin leaning heavily on his cane. He had confided in me that the abuse his bones had suffered on Berenike made true gravity a burden, that he preferred to stay aboard ships, where the slow action of suppression fields in simulation of gravity did not bring pain. I heard his breath hiss between his teeth with every odd step, and pitied him.

I had been old myself, felt the slow decay of time, the treason of my injured flesh. How could he see me as I was and not hope, not desire what I had for himself? Those who preached the regeneration of Earth believed—or claimed to believe—that her return would herald the rebirth of mankind as well. An end to illness. To suffering. To death.

For the Chantry, it was all cant. A confection spun of lie and dreaming to salve a wounded universe. But for the *true believers*? I was something else. The proof of prophecies fulfilled. They saw proof of the Chantry’s lies in me, believing me their savior. The *Son of Earth*, the *Chosen*, the *One Reborn*.

The Halfmortal.

But I was something else. *Am* something else.

“Lord Marlowe,” said Strategos Amata Rempel. She had removed her officer’s beret, and her dark hair—touched by frost—was pulled back into a knot. Her bridge coat hung from her shoulders like a cape. “The strategos informed you of the situation?”

I looked from her to the others, to Koparkar and Bartosz, Sir Gray and Tor Xanthippus. Half a hundred lesser luminaries: logothetes and junior officers, intelligence men and scholiasts all went about the room, moving from one projection table to the next, muttering to one another so as not to distract the high lords and officers at their work. I marked not only the Sollan officers present, but our allies. Sattha Kull Vhad Kvasir, the Tavrosi grand admiral, stood chief among them, bald as ever, his clan *saylash* on proud display. The tooth of some unknown creature pierced one stretched earlobe, and his eyes were hard and cold. Beside him stood Paeon of Tarú, King of the Dryads. I almost overlooked the *Tenno*, Lord Yushuhito, the Emperor-in-Nichibotsu, ethnarch of the Nipponese, so understated was his garb—black and white. And there was Alexander, seated at the rim of the central holography table.

“Three days?” I asked, arching my eyebrows, directing my attention to Alexander.

But it was Sattha Kull who answered, rich voice mocking, biting, harsh. “And they call *us* witch-men,” he said. “What are you? *Yaksha*, *jotunn*, or lunatic?”

I did not smile, said flatly, “A *yaksha* is a kind of devil, is it not?”

Kull’s face froze, his harsh smile firmly in place. “You think yourself wise. It is your lateness that cost us this chance.”

“My lateness?” I said. “Mine?” My eyes found Alexander once again. The prince was watching me, strangely tense. “But for Ohannes Douro, I might have come directly here.”

“This is the man you killed?” asked the grand admiral, “The one with the *ngearthing*.”

“The daimon, yes,” I said.

“Daimon,” Kull laughed. “You wear a new face, and you say *daimon*.”

You know, I should thank you. You have exposed the rot, the *hraesnabot*—how is it you would say?”

“Hypocrisy,” I said, stone faced. The man was Tavrosi. He could remember every fact he had ever encountered. He knew the word.

“Hypocrisy!” said Sattha Kull. “Precisely. You have left your people no leg to stand on. Let them call us *demoniacs* after this!” He laughed again.

“Are you quite done, sir?” asked King Paeon, his red hair and beard like lichen. “We’ve far more pressing concerns than this . . . wrangling.”

The grand admiral of the Tavrosi fleet had the good grace to look abashed, cowed by the tree-king’s scorn. “You’re not wrong,” he said at last. “But you must admit, ’tis rich.”

King Paeon made a gesture, as if to throw something away.

“Enough of this,” said Sir Gray Rinehart, rapping his knuckles on the rim of the holograph table. “We waste time. The Cielcin are in motion.”

Beside him, Tor Xanthippus interjected, “It has been almost a century since their last attack. Ninety-seven years since Dakara . . .”

Xanthippus continued, “We must assume they have been gathering their strength.”

“So have we,” said Strategos Koparkar, coming to stand alongside the holography table. The image there displayed a map of the local volume, a column of light projected from the table to a unit of equal size on the ceiling, like two matched teeth.

Tor Xanthippus acknowledged the strategos with the barest nod. “We are groping in the dark. It was not until Lord Marlowe arrived with the Extrasolarian map that we were able to know the enemy’s location. We have little data beyond the number of worldships bearing Vorgossene telegraphs. It is more than possible that a part of what the enemy has been engaged in is the construction of new ships. Not *worldships*, in all probability. Our best estimates hold that the construction of a Class-12 worldship must take several centuries—the sheer scale of construction . . . but we must be prepared for the possibility that a large portion of the delay is the result of a new wave of construction. I remind all present that while the intelligence provided by Lord Marlowe and Operation Iconoclast is a boon unlike

anything in our previous experience . . . it does not track the enemy's every ship. Only their largest and oldest. Because the telegraphs only connect their key ships, their fleets must remain in proximity to those ships to communicate across the galactic volume. Therefore, what we are looking at—while not comprehensive—represents the near totality of Cielcin strength.”

Operation Iconoclast, I thought. I had not known the assault on Vorgossos had been given a proper name.

“*Sono shouko wa?*” asked a quiet voice.

It was a moment before I realized who had spoken, and in what language.

“His Imperial Majesty asks how it is you are certain of this thing,” said the black-robed attendant standing beside the seated Nipponese Emperor.

Sir Gray Rinehart replied, “The Cielcin do not have the technical capabilities to produce quantum telegraphs on their own.”

“*Sore wa sou kamo shiremasen ga,*” replied the Nipponese Emperor after his servant had translated Sir Gray’s reply. “*Ekisutorasorarian kara mo enjo o ukete imasu. Kono . . . minosu to iu no . . . Mou teki no tame ni sara ni denshin o kouchiku shita no de wan ai no deshou ka? Waraware ni wa mienai nijiteki na nettowaaku?*”

“His Imperial Majesty the Emperor reminds the council that the Cielcin have Extrasolarian allies. Might MINOS not have constructed additional telegraphs for the Cielcin fleet?”

Amata Rempel put in, “He’s right. There could be more ships than we believe.”

“There are not,” I said, stepping forward. “There are sixteen hundred forty-six Cielcin worldships tracked by Sagara’s map. Of those, twenty-nine are not with the main fleet, are away to the north, in the unmapped regions.” I advanced to stand at the end of the main table, directly opposite Alexander. Addressing one logothete by the controls I said, “Expand.”

The woman adjusted a dial, forced the image to scale, showing the galaxy entire. The table showed the last known locations of the Cielcin fleet as a familiar spattering of red lights. “There,” I said, and pointed at a

smaller cluster of ships away to the north. “Majesty, when I was a prisoner of the Prophet, Dorayaica, I had occasion to witness the Cielcin totality. Nigh every clan was in attendance. There were some seventeen hundred worldships, I was told. That number has diminished somewhat, it seems . . . Unless the Cielcin are capable of hollowing out their moons and constructing their engines far more quickly than we believe . . . they will not have greatly improved their strength.”

Yushuhito’s aide repeated what I had said in his liege.

“Shikashi, Shierushin ga tasuu no kogata no fune o kenzou shita kanousei mo aru de wan ai desu ka?”

“His Majesty the Emperor inquires if the Cielcin might not have built many more smaller ships.”

“It is distinctly possible,” said Bassander Lin.

“I believe we should *count* on the presence of a redoubled fleet,” said Tor Xanthippus. “Each worldship is capable—in theory—of housing, feeding, maintaining *billions* of the xenobites.”

Strategos Rempel agreed. “We are talking about ships—the largest of which outmass many moons . . . each one is theoretically capable of carrying a fleet of thousands.”

Sattha Kull clapped his hands. “All of this is to say,” he said, “that the ship has sailed. Our opportunity to confront them in one—as Lord Marlowe has suggested—is lost. For all we know, the answer to the question of where the Cielcin are now going is *everywhere*.” He advanced as he spoke, came to stand in the shadow of the holograph.

“Then we must bring them together.”

All eyes returned to me.

“Bring them together?” asked Koparkar, seated with arms crossed. “How?”

Sir Gray Rinehart frowned. “Have you some notion?”

We had come to the pass, to one of those places, those moments that divide. Did I dare speak the truth? Show them what I had shown Olorin? Would I be believed?

Uncertain, I looked at Cassandra, hoping perhaps to see her mother’s

ghost peering out from behind those emerald eyes. I saw only my daughter—but my daughter shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

I turned to face the prince. Alexander, who had been strangely silent throughout the conversation to that point. He looked up, still hunched in his seat before the tactical holograph, a man dwarfed by the immensity of all that infinite space. “What?”

“Your father,” I said. “Does he still sleep?”

The prince did not speak.

“Alexander?”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, he sleeps.”

Then I was alone.

“Should someone not wake him?”

The prince eyed Sir Gray, as if he sought his answer in the man. Obliging, the Legion Intelligence director said, “His Radiance is too recently awake. There are dangers associated with rapid and repeated thawing, as you know.”

Is he dead? The thought intruded like a briar, caught and tore. “He should be here for this,” I said.

“I am here,” Alexander said, eyes hardening. “Anything you can say to my Imperial Father you can say to me.”

Shaking my head, I moved partway round the table, halting not far from Lin and Rempel’s position far to his right. “I would, but this pertains to him personally. You cannot assent for him.”

“Out with it, man!” Alexander snapped.

“Dorayaica wants your father alive,” I said. “That is why you are hiding here, is it not? Why his location—the location of this base, of the whole fleet—has been kept so secret for so long? Were he to take the field, openly, loudly, Dorayaica would bring the weight of its armada down to crush him.”

Alexander spared a grimace for Tor Xanthippus. “You would have me risk his life?”

“I would have *him* risk it,” I said in answer. “We can choose the place of battle. Set bait for the Cielcin.”

Bassander Lin turned to look me in the face. “You think the Prophet would fall for such bait?”

I looked at the old soldier and said, “Remember Perfugium?” I turned my face to the projected stars. “If we give Dorayaica the chance to do what we were trying to do—to strike us *here*, in one place, all at once . . . how can it resist?”

“You want to bring them here?” asked Strategos Nikhil Koparkar. “Here? Fight a defensive action?”

“It does not have to be *here*,” I said. “Suppose we were to make a show of retaking Nessus. The planet is desolate, but it is well-placed, and there may be systems that can be rebuilt there.”

Lin was nodding. “The Cielcin are sure to be monitoring the system.”

“There is another possibility,” said Sir Gray, eyes squarely on me. “The Cielcin vessels are capable of traveling much longer distances than ours without refueling.” He raised a light-pen, used it to highlight a spheroid volume around the last known location of the enemy fleet. “The limits of that effective range vary widely from worldship to worldship. Of the first three of their big ships we captured, Echidna had far less fuel capacity than Typhon or Ladon.”

“What are you driving at?” Lin asked.

Rinehart turned his light-pen over in his fingers, looking like nothing so much as a peasant schoolmaster before a room full of inattentive children. “Forum,” he said. “The Cielcin *must* know the location of the Eternal City. What is to stop the Pale bypassing us here at Gododdin? Striking at the heart of the Imperium?”

“If they wanted to do that, why have they not done so already?” asked Sattha Kull.

“Perhaps it’s simply been too far away,” Rinehart said. “These long-distance raids—Hermonassa, for example—were only ever carried out with small forces. One worldship, maybe two or three. Perhaps it was not possible or practical—until now, at least—to send so many so far. The fact remains, the Cielcin have been dormant for a century. Something has changed.”

Grand Admiral Kull barked a laugh. “But we don’t know *what!*” He sounded exasperated. “This is speculation. All of it.”

“We have no hard intelligence, save the tracer Lord Marlowe has brought us,” Rinehart replied. “No spies at the Cielcin court, no sense of their present trajectory.”

“That much at least we will learn,” said Rempel darkly. “They will have to drop out of warp eventually.”

Koparkar spoke over her. “Not if they’ve enhanced their fuel capacity. If they can bypass us here and strike at Forum directly . . .”

Rempel countered. “All we need is to detect their wakes *once* and we’ll get the answer we need.”

“So you would have us wait?” Koparkar said. “Do nothing while the greatest fighting force the galaxy has ever seen burns across our space unchecked?”

“There is *another* option,” said Bassander Lin, voice very small, “another target they might try for . . . if they wanted to hurt us.” Lin licked his lips, looked round at all the men and women there gathered. His eyes came to rest ultimately on myself. “Earth.”

Earth.

How had I not thought of it?

It was precisely the target Syriani Dorayaica might choose. The heart of man’s dominion. Her foundation. Her very womb.

The silence that greeted Lin’s words was cold as any in my experience. Even Sattha Kull seemed chilled. Though he and his kind did not worship the mother world as in the Imperium, Earth was *Earth*.

Earth.

The loss of Earth—even its marring—by the Cielcin fleet would be a blow from which the human spirit might never recover. Even beyond the Imperium, where the Holy Terran Chantry was vilified—in realms like the Demarchy and across the Small Kingdoms—there remained a thread of nostalgia, of love for Old Earth herself. The planet, not the goddess worshipped by the false black priests.

“You’re right,” I said. “Dorayaica will hit Earth. Destroy it, if it can.”

“There must be observation stations between their point of origin and the Mother,” said King Paeon—and I was surprised to hear him use Chantry religious language. “Should we not put them on high alert?”

Rempel thrust a finger in Paeon’s direction. “His Excellency is right. We know where they started. If we assume direct assaults on Forum or on . . . on Earth, we have their flight vectors. It should be a small matter of targeting the observation posts nearest those flight paths.”

Alexander was nodding. “In the meantime, we send word to Aurelian, tell him to prepare.”

“This is all well and good,” I said, still shaken by Lin’s deduction. “But you are all forgetting one thing.”

All eyes were on me then.

“They won’t be on direct approach,” I said. “Even if we’re right—and I believe Strategos Lin here *is*—they cannot afford the straight shot to Earth or Forum, even if they have refitted their fleet.”

“*Dou shite sonna ni kakushin o moteru no desu ka?*” asked Emperor Yushuhito, hands steepled before him.

“His Imperial Majesty the Emperor asks—”

“How I’m certain, yes, thank you,” I cut him off. “Because they have to eat.”

I could hear the others’ comprehension dawning as a series of short, staccato *ahs*, little winds lost in that dimly lit, high-ceilinged space. The only light—other than the light of the holographs and other consoles—came through the high, narrow windows, vertical slits set so deeply in the monolithic stone walls of the fortress.

“The Cielcin have been alone now for nigh on a century,” I said. “They are hungry, mark my words. Whatever they are planning, they will resupply first.”

Lin shouldered his way forward, came to rest beside me. “You think that’s what’s driven them from hiding?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I think it was me.”

“You?” asked Satha Kull.

“They have spies,” I said, glaring at the Tavrosi. “Word will have

reached them of my return.”

I did not say that Syriani Dorayaica had seen me with its own eyes, touched me with its own hand.

The Tavrosi grand admiral scoffed. “You think that Dorayaica would mobilize its entire war machine *for you*?”

Yes.

“No,” I said. “But we must assume that it knows that I have control of the Mericanii arsenal. *That* is what has driven it from hiding. *That* is what it is responding to. What else has changed? You have reclaimed no territory, made no move. The only battles in the last century were at Vorgossos—and I did not see any of you there—and in Jadd against the Lothrians.”

The war council ruffled its feathers, shifted where it stood. A single organism—and I had prodded it with a sharpened stick. Still, I knew that I was right. It was the Battle of Sabratha that had driven the Cielcin horde to dormancy. The arrival of Ushara at Dharan-Tun, brought to Dorayaica by the machine sorcerer, Gaizka. I had caused the Cielcin to go into dormancy. It was only right that I should shake them out of it.

Sir Gray Rinehart possessed the clarity to nod. “What you say makes sense.”

“What are we to do?” asked King Paeon, his eyes forever on the target. “Wait for the Cielcin to attack?”

“Yes,” said I, turning to regard the green man. “If I am right, then the *Utnamnavi* is right.” I inclined my head to Sattha Kull. “The Cielcin will strike us everywhere, all across the outer provinces. Whatever their intentions, whether they intend to make for Forum or for Earth or anywhere else, we will have this chance—this *one* chance—to head them off. If we can hit them hard enough, we can still stop them.”

Alexander could abide my speech no more. Standing he said, “But we have no idea where they are going! Unless by some chance we sight them with our watchtowers, we cannot respond fast enough!”

“I will take *Demiurge*,” I said. “It is fast enough, and large enough to carry an Imperial fleet in its holds.”

“You’re insane,” Alexander said.

“You destroyed *Bradamante*!” said Leonid Bartosz, speaking for the first time that entire meeting. “You attacked the last of our fleets sent to support your mad cause, and now you ask for another!”

“I have the Mericanii arsenal!” I said. “And with it, the power to destroy Dharan-Tun. To cut off the head of the snake. Lend me a fleet—a battle group. Anything. Whatever support you will give. I will take *Demiurge* and cross the Gulf to the edge of Centaurine space. Once I have ascertained Dharan-Tun’s location, I will strike . . .”

Here I turned, picked Leonid Bartosz out of those gathered there. “You read the reports from Vorgossos. You know what my ship is capable of.”

“Your ship?” asked Alexander

“I will kill Dorayaica for you,” I said. “With the Prophet slain, it will fall to the rest of you to hound those that remain. Sagara’s map is a map to their annihilation. But first we must kill Dorayaica. Only once before in Cielcin history has one of their kind managed to unite the clans—and that was when they were much smaller in number. The Prophet has no successor. No heir. It has only slaves, slaves who will see themselves as free the instant it falls.”

No one spoke then, not for a long moment.

“You stand to lose very little by this,” I said, “and you may gain *all*. A galaxy at peace. An end to war—to *this* war, at any rate. I offer you no less than a return to man’s unquestioned supremacy in our galaxy. For this, you must give me ships—no more than my ship can carry. Is there none here brave enough to go? Is there none willing?”

“Save your speeches.” I could not find the voice at once among those gathered. “I am convinced.”

Sattha Kull Vhad Kvasir circled, moved to stand opposite me; his eyes were shining, black as jet, and the light of projected stars glinted off his oiled scalp. “If the Empire will not sanction this expedition. I will go.”

“My Lord Grand Admiral!” Alexander started.

“Tis but *Grand Admiral*, prince,” Kull said, raising his tattooed left hand. “I am no lord, nor am I yours.” He fixed me with his imitation eyes. “You believe you can do this thing?”

I spared a glance for Alexander. “Yes.”

“Your lateness cost us our best chance,” Kull said, and wagged a finger at me. “If this is truly our last . . . then you have my ships.”

“And mine!” said Bassander Lin. Raising his voice, he turned to Alexander, and with a great effort sank to one knee, his right hand white-knuckled on the gilt head of his cane. I noticed for the first time that the handle was fashioned in the shape of a songbird.

A Phoenix.

“My prince, I pray, permit me to take *Tempest* and my people on this expedition.”

Alexander was silent.

Whatever his private thoughts, the prince nodded—and the lives of billions hung upon that nod, though neither he nor I then knew it. “Very well,” he said. “Very well.”

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CHAPTER 27

SUN AND MOON

THE TAVROSI ARMADA AND Lin's own fleet both needed time to prepare. Our plan was to cross the Gulf between the arms of our galaxy to the leading edge of Centaurus, shaving hundreds of light-years from any response we might give the expected Cielcin attack.

Everything hinged upon my instinct that the Cielcin would strike to feed themselves sooner than launch any concerted effort—whether upon Forum or Earth herself or any other target. For almost a century, the entire Cielcin race had been out in the dark. Alone, eating through whatever it was—whoever it was—they could grow and breed on their worlds. The thought of so many countless million human souls languishing in their ranches, their abattoirs, filled me with crawling horror.

I hated them. Yet still the thought that their kind and culture should be extinguished was a horror of its own. They were victims. Puppets. Clients. Tools. The Watchers had been at them since their childhood, whispering to Elu across the space between worlds. They had uplifted the Cielcin, taught them—who had been raised in the pits beneath the surface of Se Vattayu—to look at the sky. The Watchers taught them to fly, made them great—and destroyed them. There was an honor in them, and an honesty I admired. A directness, a cleanness like the cleanness of a shining sword, but *tarnished*, touched by rot.

Could I destroy them? Could I do what the Absolute had asked?

Might not the sword have been in the other hand? Might it not be one day? It was not impossible for me to imagine some other Hadrian, an *alien* Hadrian, wielded by the maker of all things as a burning brand.

Perhaps we are being punished even now . . .

And yet I had to act. For all our sakes. For *you*.

• • •

“That Sir—Gray, was it?—was telling me the . . . plague is in the city,” Cassandra said, walking along beside me. “That it’s in the camp.”

“Yes,” I said, not slowing. A proper inoculation for the Minoan plague had not yet been developed, despite the best efforts of the Imperial High College, and Gododdin’s status as the final destination of all the components of the Imperial war machine meant that more had come to the fortress and to Catraeth than men and arms. “The castellan’s men are more or less all given over to quarantine detail.”

Cassandra faltered, and I turned to look at her. “Are we safe here?”

“You and I won’t be here much longer. Another few days at the most.” I drew her aside, the better to permit the lay logothetes and military men the run of the corridor. A courier drone streaked overhead, carrying some confidential message on paper or quartz storage.

“You’d think they’d move the prince and the rest clear . . .” Cassandra spoke Jaddian and eyed a quartet of armored Martians as they passed.

“Alexander is the one keeping them here,” I said, matching her tongue.

“Really?” Cassandra’s eyebrows arched. “That *surrakha*?”

I smiled. *Surrakha* was *peacock*, and not the polite word. Literally it meant *squealer*.

“Have a care, *Anaryan*,” said I.

She squinted at me. I knew what she was thinking. That he had tried to kill me.

Alexander had two faces. One virtuous and strong, one conniving, cowardly. I had failed to cultivate the former, and failing had—for a time—cultivated the latter.

“We must telegraph *Demiurge*,” I said. “They need to know when to make the rendezvous.”

“I can do it,” Cassandra said. “I was going to go back to the ship. Neema will be glad to know we’re leaving soon.”

“Good.” I nodded. “Five days, the coordinates we agreed upon. Do not put them in the telegraph. *Iupham*?”

“*Si, Abba.*”

“*Ben jidaan.*”

There was a tug at my elbow, and turning I found myself faced with one of the Aventine House androgyns.

“Lord Marlowe?” The servitor saluted, clicked its heels together.

“Just *Marlowe*, eunuch,” I said. “Best drop the *lord*, else your master will have you caned.”

The creature blanched. “Forgive me, lord—I mean. I have a summons.”

“A summons?” I had just seen Alexander in council. “From the Prince Regent?”

The creature thrust out its hand, offered me a tightly wound little scroll. It said nothing.

I did not take it, suddenly cautious. “From the Prince Regent?” I asked again.

“My lord—I—I was instructed not to say.”

The Emperor? I thought. *Nicephorus? The Chantry?*

I took the scroll. It was sealed with the red wax of the Imperium. I broke the seal, unwound the slip of paper. Inside was another piece of paper. When I saw what it was, I laughed, and showed Cassandra. She smiled only gradually, understanding coming slow. “Go raise *Demiurge*,” I said, “tell Neema I will be late.”

• • •

The androgyn did not convey me through the fortress to some obscure office or officer’s suite, but down through a lift-tram and out into the lower terraces, where the pale light of Gododdin’s sun—reflected on the planet’s main orbital mirror—shone down amidst spider-legged artillery. The mass of the old fortress loomed above us, main tower dominating. The men about us were all Gododdin locals—the Castellan’s men, those primarily tasked with the ordering of the food exports. They shouted roughly to one another

as we passed, heedless—so it seemed—of the war, the plague, the darkness gathering beyond the limits of their sky.

Crossing the yard then behind the little androgyn, I wanted nothing so much as to be one of the men unloading crates from the laden wain that had been brought in from the lower gates.

“Hey, Murtaz,” one called. “I heard it’s bromos again for supper, can you imagine?”

“You don’t say!” his companion said, “Don’t tell me. What flavor? Brown?”

“No, hear it’s red-brown for us tonight!”

“Oho, moving up in the world,” the second said. “Brass are really splurging. Take the Emperor’s coin, they said. See the galaxy, they said. Eat the same damn shit every day, I says.”

“The red one’s got a bit of spice to it,” said the first. “Chin up!”

“Curry!” his companion countered. “If I taste that fake curry ever again, it’ll be too soon.”

“It’s gonna be too soon, boyo.”

I halted. “It’s not much better up top, lads, I tell you.”

The men froze. One of them elbowed another. “Holy Mother Earth . . .” said the first man. “You’re . . . you’re *him*, aren’t you?”

The whole crew saluted, save one, who eyed me with suspicion.

They were not my people, not my men. The little androgyn halted, turned to look back at me with Imperial green eyes.

“Did you really die?” asked the man who had done the bulk of the complaining. “Did the priests really kill you?”

“Is it true the priests keep daimons?” asked another.

What could I say?

“Lord—ah—Marlowe, sir,” said the androgyn. “We must go.”

I looked at the men, studying their faces—honest, open faces, sans guile, sans contempt.

“It’s all true,” I said, and turned away.

I wanted to join them. To help in finishing their labors—as I had aboard *Tamerlane* uncounted times. I wanted to speak with them, to share their

poor meal, and learn of their lives and their women, the families they would never see again.

But those days were over, that life was done—had been done a long time ago, long before my second death.

Cassandra was my last anchor, my only tie to the world of men.

Or nearly my last . . .

. . .

A little flier awaited us on a pad atop a wide and shallow square turret, black bodied, edged in gold—as all Imperial craft are—but its design was delicate, hull black mirrored, not matte, its very body the wing that gave it lift, each end inset with repulsors.

I asked no questions as I climbed aboard, trusting the little note I had received.

“We’re not going far,” said my guide.

I’d keyed a written message to Annaz via my terminal as we walked. The Irchtani had taken to flying “practice” since we arrived at the planet, forever circling above the fortress and the city. In reality, they were forever protecting me, ready to swoop in at the first sign of trouble.

The birdmen could never overtake a speeding aircraft, but they could follow me, and the flier was not one suited to break atmosphere. I watched Fort Din fall away, the lower terraces like so many worn-down stone steps descending from the fortress on its rise. There was Catraeth, the white city old and fine, but sad, dominated by the ribbed and hastily built watchtowers that had been erected to maintain the curfews and quarantines the plague made necessary. And there were the camps, an open wound on the face of that once-so-lovely world, a horrid tangle of tents and lean-tos, of bungalows and prefabricated relief housing. I could see the *crowd*, that mass of unwashed bodies pressed against the triple barrier of chain fencing—razor crowned—that held back the human tide. They were waiting for the ships.

I tried not to think of the desperation there, the depredation of body and spirit such a place must breed. I tried not to think of the sickness, the abuses, the plain and simply ugliness of the world that must run rampant there.

I prayed the next ship would come soon, though it couldn't take them all away.

Our flier reached its destination: a cothon in the very heart of the new-poured landing field, beyond the fat lozenges of the cargo cogs parked flat upon the tarmac. The ship in its heart was like a tower, like an old-style rocket standing tall. I saw it on our final approach, rising above the rim of the cothon to overlook the airfield. The tower's crown was open, a kind of portico extruded from it with a place to dock our flier. My unseen pilot took us down, and the hatch clamshelled open, the bottom part becoming steps.

The androgyn hurried down ahead of me. I followed it more slowly. We'd not gone far at all, and high up I saw the shape of what the commoners must take for eagles—they were my Irchtani.

Hold pattern, I tapped into my terminal. *Await my word*.

"My lady!" The wind lifted the homunculi's voice, made of my cloak black wings, my long hair a feathered crown—as though it were some old raven that perched upon Her Highness's rail and not the Devil of Meidua. "I have Lord Marlowe, as you asked!"

"Thank you, Augustulus," came the princess's warm voice from the arched entry. "You may retire."

The androgyn doffed its cap—momentarily revealing its utterly hairless head. Bowing, it withdrew, scurrying past its mistress into the darkened chamber atop the grounded tower-ship.

"Did you like my message?" asked the woman in the arch.

I held it up for her examination. "Very funny."

It was a strip of black paper, tightly rolled, without so much as a dot of ink writ on it.

Selene laughed. "I thought it was."

"Is this supposed to be a secret?" I asked.

"Not precisely," she said. "Alexander knows I'm here, but I thought to

minimize the amount of attention our meeting might arouse. Augustulus is very discreet.” She stepped forward, emerged fully into the light. “I’ve missed you, Hadrian.”

Sixty-five standard years had passed since we parted ways on Latarra—more than fifty for me.

The woman standing in the shadow of that arched and filigreed portal had hardly aged a day, and I said as much.

“It has been about six months for me,” she said drawing nearer, white gown fluttering in the breeze of that high place. Her hair—red as flame—had grown long again, reached almost to her waist. Where before it had coiled after the fashion of the Imperial court, she wore it then straightened, mirror smooth and center parted, cut short across her forehead, right along the brow line. Her gown left her arms bare, and the skin on them was almost as pale her dress. Rubies shone at throat and wrists, and flashed upon her fingers.

“It has been more than fifty years,” I said.

Fifty years? She mouthed the words. She stopped less than a foot from me, flushed, looked away. “I thought . . . I thought I would never see you again.”

“I did not,” I said. I had seen visions of us together, and while much of what I have seen never was—or never will be—I’d had a sense that our end had not yet come.

“They say you are a traitor,” she said, “that you attacked the men we sent to aid the Latarrans at Vorgossos.”

“And what do you believe?”

“That you are no traitor,” she said. “Why would you come here if you were?”

The wind kicked up, blew my cape and hair sharply to one side. Away over the landing field, one supply cog—rectangular in profile, trapezoidal in cross section—was floating into the air, repulsors working to counter the pull of Gododdin’s gravity.

“You’re wiser than most of the war council,” I said, and looked away. “But I did kill them. Lord Douro, the Chantry men.” Technically, *Demiurge*

had killed Kedron itself. I *would* have killed Kedron, most especially after what he did to my Cassandra. “The Chantry are demoniacs, Selene. They brought a . . . a great intelligence onto Kharn Sagara’s ship—the one I took from Vorgossos.”

Her eyes were wide. “It’s true, then?”

I could only nod.

“We should go inside,” she said, and took my hand.

“My lady,” I said, “I should not.”

Selene arched one eyebrow. “You fear for the perception of my virtue?”

“Not your virtue,” I said, “your life.”

She was very close, her hand still holding mine. “They would not dare,” she said. “My father would burn them if they touched me, and my brother —” She broke off. “Alexander would never let me come to harm. He and Matthias wanted me kept in fugue. They would have sent me to Forum if Father has not left his orders. But Lord Nicephorus blocked them.”

“Where is Nicephorus?” I asked. The Lord Chamberlain had ever been the faithful executor of its Imperial Master’s will.

“On *Aurora*,” Selene said. “With Father.”

It was the answer I expected. “They won’t let me aboard *Aurora*,” I said. “I’ve tried.”

“Security is very tight,” she said. “The plague . . . no one goes aboard the flagship without good reason.”

There was something she was not saying . . .

“And they let you down here?” I said.

She drew back a moment. “I am not allowed to leave this ship. I had to beg my brothers and Lord Nicephorus to let me down here, I . . . I wanted to see you.”

The flush that filled me then felt like treason. The memory of her kisses smoldered in me, burnt the hand that she had touched.

She had drawn near again.

“It is . . . good to see you, Highness,” I said.

“Selene,” she corrected. Three little syllables. “Please.”

She had seen me die; my body annihilated by Samek’s poison. She had

seen me return, naked and new-made aboard the *Mistwalker*. She knew what I was, that I was myself and no replicant.

She was very close again, and before I realized it, her breath had become my air.

She had to go up on her toes to kiss me, and I stooped to meet her, my hands going to her velvet sides. The wind took my cloak, her gown, my hair and hers—brushed them all together in its fingers, black and white and red and black. I did not draw away.

Valka, forgive me.

It was nearly three hundred of my years since she was gone, nearly half my waking life.

Too sweet is the rind, say the sages, I thought, looking at the princess as she stood there, eyes yet closed, *too bitter the core*.

“There,” Selene said, turning her head away, “now they will talk. Will you not come inside?”

There were men on the airfield below, longshoremen, stevedores, traffic controllers with their gleaming wands. High up as we were—a dozen levels or more above the tarmac, thrice that above the floor of the cothon pit where Selene’s rocket was moored—one at least was sure to see the red princess and the black knight’s embrace.

“I am leaving in five days,” I said.

She drew back as if stung. “So soon?”

I did not chase her. “The Cielcin are moving,” I said. “I can stop them. I *have* to stop them.”

The princess’s eyes widened as I spoke, and I sensed that she saw *through* me, as though to her I was a sculpture of clear glass. Of ice. “You’re not coming back,” she said at last, voice small, “are you?”

I did not dare speak.

“You’re not!”

I shut my eyes.

“So that’s it, then?” she said. “This is goodbye? Is that why you came here?”

“I came because you called, ladyship,” I said.

“*Selene*,” she said again.

“Selene,” I said. “I came because you called, and to look upon the jewel of the Empire one last time.”

I sensed the anger in her, felt it grinding, generating heat. “Go then,” she said. “You have seen her.” She turned away, rebuffed.

“I am going to die,” I said.

She halted, frozen on the spot.

I’d not said it aloud before, not to anyone—not even to Cassandra. Certainly not to Cassandra.

“I’ve seen it.”

“You can’t die,” Selene said. “*I’ve* seen that much.”

“I’ve died twice,” I said. “Once when I was a boy, then again in the Arx Caelestis.” I took a step nearer her. Still she did not turn. “I’ve been preserved for a purpose, Selene.”

You are the shortest way . . . the voice of the Absolute filled my ears and memory alike.

“I have seen the future—the countless futures. They all poured through my head. It was more than any human mind can hold. I cannot remember them all, but I have seen my death more times than I can count—in more ways than you can imagine.” She began to turn as I spoke, to look slowly back over one shoulder. It would have been better for her had she not stopped, better if she had stormed back into her tower and shut the door. It might have spared her her fate. But she turned, revealing that delicate profile, the large green eyes, the full lips, the celestial nose. “You know what awaits me.” She had seen the images from Sabratha. I had shown her *everything* on the flight to Latarra. “I will not return.”

She had fully turned by then, was looking at me with a horror and a pain that smote my heart. I had not wanted her to so care for me—nor had I thought to care for her.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“Because I want someone to know,” I said, advancing on her as I spoke.

“It was for this that I was born. Can I give less than my life?”

Selene folded her hands before her breast, looked down at them, as if

studying her red-and-white-jeweled rings. “But you have defied fate before . . .”

“It isn’t fate,” I said. “Only the cosmos itself is fated. Our lives are our own. I spend mine willingly.” I was standing over her by then, a dark shadow in the pale light of Gododdin’s day. “Selene . . . when I am gone . . . will you protect Cassandra? There are those at court who would destroy her simply for the crime of being my daughter.”

Though her eyes were downcast, I saw that they were shining. “And who will protect me? For being your . . .”

What?

Her words died, choked off.

“There *has* to be some way!” she said.

I put a hand beneath her chin, lifted her eyes to mine. “This *is* the way,” I said. “The Watchers are gods, Selene. They helped to build this universe—and then they broke it. I am just a man, but I am tasked to destroy them—two of them, at least—and to destroy the Cielcin, their slaves. If my life is to be the price of that victory, I pay it gladly.”

Her hand rose, flashed, struck me across the cheek. There was almost no force behind it. The reproach in her eyes was stronger than any strength of arms, and I felt shame despite myself. “Your *daughter* will not pay it gladly, *sir*,” she said. “Nor will I.”

It was my turn to half turn away. “When I was dead,” I said, “I saw a . . . vision . . . I was taken by a servant of the maker of the universe. He showed me the end of time—the death of the last stars. He told me that the maker—the Absolute, the Quiet, if you like—would triumph in the end, and destroy the Watchers. He told me that victory was certain, that the Watchers would surely be destroyed.”

“Then why bother with any of this?” Selene said. “If victory is certain, as you say?”

“Because it’s not a victory for *us*,” I said, letting the hand fall from my cheek. “It’s not our victory. The Quiet may be victorious at the last, but we can still lose.”

Selene shook the tears from her eyes. “But why?” she asked, furious. “If

this Quiet of yours can destroy the Cielcin *and* their gods, why doesn't he? Why doesn't he help us?"

"He *is* helping us," I said simply. "He sent me."

The princess's nostrils flared, and she looked away. "You take a lot on yourself."

I caught her hand, prevented her turning away. Looking her square in the face, I said, "I take what is given to me. No more." She said nothing, let the hurt in her eyes speak for her.

"Will you protect Cassandra when I am gone?" I asked.

She shook her head. "What can *I* do? Your daughter is already stronger than I will ever be."

"You are a princess of the Imperium," I said. "Take her for an armsman. Find her a husband. Hide her, if you have to. But help her. Please. She has no one but me." There were the Jaddians as well, but would they be enough?

She would not look at me, would not move.

"Your father will not see me," I said, hoping to spur her from her catatonia.

"What?" She looked round. "My father is . . . no." Her eyes returned to the deck beneath her jeweled feet. A flier passed overhead, and its shadow made me look up. Far off, I spied three of Annaz's men still circling.

"He's dying, isn't he?" I asked.

Her silence was answer enough.

"And Alexander will take the throne?" I asked. "Because the Chantry want him. He's their man."

"Take me with you," Selene said. "When you go."

Her voice had been very small, lost almost entirely to the wind.

"I can't do that," I said, and felt her stiffen. "The Council wants my head already. And the Chantry."

"Because of Douro?"

"It's not just Douro," I said. "I had to threaten to destroy the Eternal City to come here."

"Forum?" Selene looked at me, aghast. "Would you have done it?"

It was a question better left unanswered.

“They tolerate me now because they need me, and for no other reason. So you see, my victory will be a defeat, just like the Quiet’s victory over the Watchers. Even if I do not die, the Empire—my home, my people—will be forever lost to me.”

Her hand found mine again, tightened there. “All the more reason to let me come with you.”

She didn’t understand. If I took her, the Empire would chase me.

“You know I can’t.”

“And so I am to stay here—the princess in her tower—while you go to meet some heroic death apart from those who love you?”

“Love me?” I echoed. It was best to hurt her—just a little—if hurting her would make her stay. “You love a dream, Selene.”

Her eyes were hard as diamonds, sharp as broken glass. “Don’t say that.”

“Your father needs you,” I said, and that—at least—was truth.

“No, he doesn’t,” she said.

“If he is dying—”

“There are *one hundred thirty-eight* of us, Hadrian. My brothers and sisters . . .” She glared up at me, the charcoal on her eyes beginning to run. “Do you really think he even knows who I am?”

Her hands were fists at her side.

My heart ached.

“Go,” she said. “If you must go, go.”

“Selene . . .” I took a mistaken step toward her.

“I said *go*, sir!”

At the sound of her shouting, a figure stirred in the shadow of the arched portal. I hadn’t noticed it before—but then I had not been meant to. The knight was armored all in mirrored plate, its helm fashioned in the likeness of a man’s Olympian countenance. The figure had *dissolved* into view, armor shedding its active camouflage. It was taller than any ordinary man, broader of shoulder, thicker of arm. And it was silent, though in its hand it grasped the golden hilt of an unkindled sword.

It was one of the Excubitors, the Emperor's innermost guards.

It was Selene's familiar. Her custodian. Her shadow.

I bowed then, long and deeply—who had not bowed even to the Emperor.

“Think well of me, my lady,” I said, still bowing, “when I am gone.”

She had already turned her back.

For the last time . . . or so I thought.

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CHAPTER 28

PLUTO AND PROSERPINE

THE DAY OF OUR departure came, as fair and foul as any I had seen. The pale-yellow sun shone bright and clear through the high ribbons of cloud.

Bassander Lin had left two days prior, riding with his men up the hightower to the orbital dockyard, and from the dockyard to his *Tempest*. The bulk of the ships bound for our little expedition were his, and so he required the most time to prepare. There were personnel and provisions to move round. His ships needed fuel, munitions, final maintenance checks. By contrast, Sattha Kull would not depart until the next day. Great as the Tavrosi fleet was and deadly, its ships measured their crews by the hundred, not the tens of thousands. The Tavrosi had no infantry—no outward facing military at all before the wars began, only the home defense force, of which Valka once had been a captain. They could deploy far more quickly than Lin ever could.

“Holden, make sure those crates are secure!” I said. “Where’s Ketevan?”

“On the bridge,” said Ghoshal’s man.

“Good,” I said. “When you’re done, tell her to begin the pre-launch sequence and strap yourself in. I’ll not be long.”

After our initial landing in the yard of Fort Din, we had been relocated to a landing pad atop a turret in one of the lower terraces, still high on a knee of rock overlooking the landing field. I was reluctant to go. Not because I wanted to stay—in truth, I had wanted to flee the fortress then for weeks—but because to leave was to slip the protective embrace of Gododdin’s magnetic field, and to expose myself to the ravening eyes of the Watchers. Miudanar and Ushara still were seeking me. Of that much I was certain. We would be some days reaching *Demiurge*, during most of which we would be safely at warp, obscured by the vessel’s manifold of bended

space. But in the moments when we were not at warp—leaving Gododdin, and at our rendezvous with *Demiurge* and the fleet—then there would be nothing between me and the all-seeing eyes of those wretched gods of night.

The docking pad was set atop a broad, square turret at one corner of the third terrace, above a bailey where the men of the Martian Guard had their drills. They were drilling then: big, scarred fellows hard at work, their sergeant shouting commands to choruses of *Sir, yes, sir*.

I felt once more that gulf of space—as between species—and standing at the parapet, permitted my cloak to fall about my shoulders. The pin that held it at my shoulder was of silver fashioned in the likeness of a skull crowned with little roses. It had been one of Valka's hairpins, and made a fitting emblem—an icon of my mood. I must have seemed a shadow to the men below, an old crow perched upon the ramparts, *Ascalon* behind me, her black body dark and sleek, her single tall tailfin rising above her stern cluster, the red pentangle painted upon it catching the pale sun.

“You're leaving.”

I had not expected the owner of that drawling aristocratic voice—as perhaps I ought. Turning, I found the prince standing at the top of the stairs that ran along the face of the tower to the bailey below. He was, apparently, alone, but my experience with Selene and her cloaked praetorian told me that the Knights Excubitor were doubtless not far.

“Is that not the plan?” I asked. I had not bowed. I looked away from him, back out over the airfield, where a dromond was rising even then—laden with refugees, perhaps, or bromos for the fleet.

“Your plan,” Alexander said.

“Did you not approve it?”

The younger man—he was no longer young—came to stand beside me. “I did.” He shaded his eyes, peered up at the sky. It was just possible to make out the shapes of the lowest-orbiting dreadnoughts, arrowheads and lozenges, dull gray against the blue eggshell of the sky. “Can you do it?”

“Defeat the Cielcin?”

“Don't play the fool with me, Hadrian,” he said. “Can you defeat the

Monumentals?”

I turned my face to look at him, no longer surprised. “The Mericanii weapons were made to defeat them.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“I will defeat them,” I said, “or I will die trying.”

Alexander snorted. “What? No prophecy? No guarantee?”

“There are no guarantees,” I said. “I do not know the future.”

“What then?”

“Only the past.”

Again the man snorted. “If that’s true, then you’re nothing.”

“You misunderstand me. *You* remember what happened. I remember everything that *might* have happened . . . every life I might have lived.” I bowed my head, hooked my thumbs through my belt and sash beneath the cloak. Valka’s hairpin brushed my cheek. “We might have been friends, you and I.”

Alexander took a step back, made a derisive sound. “You hated me.”

“I know that,” I said, peering at him with one violet eye. “I do not hate you anymore, dear boy—though you’ve given me ample reason.” The hilt of my sword bumped against my leg, its core the core of the blade Lord Bourbon and the Empress had given Irshan to slay me long ago. “I want to congratulate you.”

“Congratulate me?” he said, “For what?”

“You will soon take the throne,” I said. “I know your father is dying.”

A shadow flickered in the hollows of the prince’s graven face.

“Father has not formally named his successor,” Alexander said.

“But it *is* you,” I said. “The Chantry have helped keep you in position all these years.”

Alexander’s face was unreadable. “I am a faithful Son of Earth.”

“You knew the truth, didn’t you?” I asked. “About the Chantry?”

The man seemed to crystallize, to turn almost to stone.

“You never said anything about it, or about Douro,” I said. “Not in any of our meetings. Why is that, I wonder?”

The prince did not speak at once. He just stood there, white helm heavy

on his head. “You think you know everything.”

“You’re the solution to their little problem,” I said. “You make their daimon disappear, and they back your ascension.”

“You of all people should understand,” Alexander said. “I saw the beast you travel with. Don’t pretend that you’re a zealot, that you keep *clean*. You fly a Vorgossene ship. Use Mericanii weapons. Surround yourself with your inhuman *freaks*. Aristedes, that Corvo woman, even your daughter’s a Jaddian bastard, an intus—”

Something in my eyes stopped the prince’s tongue. A hundred years ago, it might have stopped the man speaking for good and all, but the new strength and will coiled in the man, seemed to roil beneath his skin. With renewed conviction, Alexander said, “You dare set yourself up as judge? You? I know what it was you took to bed every night of your life. You act horrified, but you don’t care. You think me a hypocrite, but I never *fucked* one of them, Marlowe.”

I only smiled, said, “It’s not the hypocrisy, it’s the lie.” How strange that I should echo Syriani itself in that moment. “Your Empire is built on lies and secrets. Does that not bother you?”

“I do what I have to—we do what we have to—for the good of the realm, for the good of our people.”

“There is one of those lies now,” I said, and turned to go. “It pains me that I will not see your father again. He is a good man, and a better friend than I have deserved. Give him my love, when he awakes. Tell him I have gone to bring him the victory.” I halted at the base of the ramp, a black shadow drinking the sun. The wind—the seeming-ceaseless wind of Gododdin—lifted my hair and cape again as I turned back. “I meant what I said, dear boy: You’ve my sincere congratulations. May you inherit an Empire at peace.” I caught the hem of my cloak. “But a word of caution. A prophecy, if you like. There is no better ally than truth. The daimons. The Watchers. The truth *will* get out. Crush it if you like, if you can . . . but the truth is a weed that grows when trampled on. It will grow to strangle you . . . if you force it to.”

Alexander laughed, a cold, joyless sound. “You always were so

dramatic . . .”

“I am honest,” I said, one foot on the base of *Ascalon*’s ramp. “Someone has to be.”

With that I mounted the ramp and climbed up into the hold, hammering the bulkhead with my fist as I went to signal to the bridge crew that I was aboard. How small he seemed, how shrunken, how forlorn, a figure in white, wearing that incongruous statement of a helm, hands on his hips.

Too slim those shoulders to bear the weight of Empire.

Too brittle those bones.

. . .

Ere half an hour passed we were gone, lifting gently away from Fort Din on quiet repulsors. I watched the fortress unroll beneath us, the white city with its fungal growth of camps. The black lattice sentry towers that the Legions had built were a separate infection, the plague another. There was Selene’s tower, and there the yard where Udax once had tried to claim my life.

Then it was gone, we were gone, striking out over the Sea of Grass and low hills. Mountains, desert, cloud. Gododdin shrank beneath us, fell away, and day became sunlit night. There were the proud ships of the Imperial line, black and gold and beautiful. Then they too were gone.

“What is it, Abba?” Cassandra asked, rising from her seat when we had broken orbit.

“It is nothing, Anaryan,” I said, speaking Jaddian so as not to be understood by Ketevan and Holden, seated at the controls.

Time runs down.

“Alexander came to see me off.”

“That snake?” Cassandra asked. “I don’t like him, Abba. He reminds me of the boys who’d come last in drills and blame Master Hydarnes, say the test was stupid.”

That brought a smile to my lips.

Alexander was not his father, would never be. And yet he was to rule.

He had the Chantry at his back, believed them to be his agents—though in truth he would be theirs. What was true gold would be sold off, replaced with a thing gilded. What was once well maintained would become overgrown. All things die, decay, go to rot.

Even stars.

Even time.

There is a flaw in creation, as I have said. The very principles made to direct its function are turned against it. Ushara was to have been a shepherd of the stars, but she had made herself a wolf, and Miudanar—what had Miudanar’s once-sacred function been? What all-important task had he been given at the dawn of time? What eldritch function did he no longer serve? So too the Empire—which ought to have served its people—served some other purpose entirely.

“How long ’til we’re at warp?” I asked, reverting to the standard.

“Four hours,” the man answered from the copilot’s seat.

“Four hours, thirty-three minutes,” Ketevan amended.

I touched Valka’s hairpin, the skull garlanded with roses. “I will be in my cabin. I’ve need of rest.” I could not sleep—cannot sleep—but I desired to be alone. “Transmit the rendezvous coordinates to Kull and Lin, and telegraph *Demiurge*. Tell them we’re on our way.”

• • •

“I cannot begin to tell you what a relief it is to be away from all those . . . dreadful people, *domi*,” said Neema, bustling about the little cabin. He had set himself the task of reorganizing the many compartments and a stack of clothes lay on the foot of the bed I now but seldom used. “I was so certain, so certain there would be some ugliness before we made it clear, after . . .” He choked. But for Selene, Neema had been the only other person to see my body—what remained of my body—after Samek’s poison had had its way with me. “They’ve no concept of all it is you do for them, as I’m always saying.”

Old Neema was uncomfortable with silence.

“Can I just say what a relief it is that both you and the young lady are unhurt? I was so worried she would get herself into some mischief . . . that temper of hers.”

“She gets that from me,” I said.

Neema was silent a moment, considering, a pair of gabardine trousers half-folded in his soft hands. “You may be right, master.”

“You know I’m right, Neema,” I said.

“Far be it from me to criticize *you*, master.”

I arched my eyebrows.

Neema turned to restore a stack of garments to its compartment, grumbling about the lack of space to hang things properly. “How long until we return to *Demiurge*?”

“About three weeks,” I said. “Then we await the Tavrosi and Strategos Lin.”

“You really think their ships will fit *inside* that big, awful vessel?”

“Oh, with room to spare,” I said. “You haven’t seen the main holds, Neema.”

“I try to see as little of the ship as possible, *domi*.”

I nodded silently, head propped on one hand. The folio open on the desk built against the wall lay open, a portrait half-formed on one black page.

It was an icon of Two-Faced Time, one face looking forward, the other back.

Traditionally, the image showed the body of a man, his aged countenance turned back over his shoulder, signifying the past, while the face on the back of his head—that of a young woman—looked forward as the man’s feet stepped into a future he could not see. I had reversed the image, so that it was a woman’s body, and the woman’s face that looked back, the man forward.

The woman was Selene. The man Alexander.

“I confess I do not understand this plan of yours,” Neema said. “You think the Cielcin intend to assault Earth—Old Earth, I should say. Or that

they intend to attack Forum. But you do not know which to protect . . . and instead of doing either, you do neither. We're going quite the wrong way."

"We don't know what they're planning," I said. "But we know they have to eat. They will have to strike a number of systems in the outer provinces in preparation for whatever Dorayaica has planned. Our aim is to stop them before they launch that final assault. If I'm right—if we have this one opportunity to head them off—then we must."

The Nemrutti servant fidgeted. "*Domi*, forgive me, I . . . what if you are mistaken? And the *davoi* launch directly into whatever it is they have planned?"

"Then we lose," I said, stretching backward until my chair rocked beneath me. "But we won't lose. I . . ." How could I say it without sounding mad—though anything I might say would seem mad to Neema, surely. "I can *feel* them, Neema. The Watchers. They are looking for me, always looking . . . if it comes to it, I have only to reveal myself to them, and they will come." I smiled. "If the hill will not come to Mahomet . . ."

This last I said in Classical English, quoting Bacon.

"*Domi*?"

"It is nothing, Neema," I said. "I—"

Whatever I might have said was interrupted by a terrific *crash*, followed by a *squaw*, a shout in the hall outside. I was on my feet in a twinkling, and snatched my sword from its hasp where it hung by the door. Unshod, unshielded, I shouted for Neema to stay where he was and punched the door controls. The Jaddian homunculus tittered, calling after me, but I was already in the hall.

One of the Irchtani was fighting *thin air*. His huge wings beat, talons and pinions scratching at nothing, feathers filling the narrow space. He appeared to wrestle with something, his clawed feet clenched about a thing I could not see. Holden stood just beyond, clutching his sidearm, uncertain what to do.

My blade shimmered in my hand, mind racing to understand what it was I was seeing, certain that here was some mischief, some assassination attempt. As I watched, confounded, whatever unseen force there was seized

the Irchtani and slammed him bodily against the bulkhead. The black-feathered creature slid up the wall as if held by some invisible hand. One pinion hand produced a knife, slammed it down on the empty air. I heard a *ping* as of ceramic on ceramic.

“What is this?” Holden asked.

I thought I understood.

“Put him down!” I roared, raising my own blade. “It’s me you want!” Still the Irchtani was held against the wall. “I said *put him down!*”

There was no reply.

My sword was aimed square at empty space.

“Show yourself!” I said, and locked eyes with Holden. There was a faint disturbance, a rippling, a shimmer on the air. A moment later, the Irchtani fell to the deck with a clatter, and the air shuddered as the unseen foe turned—must have turned—to face me.

“Verus!” a familiar voice rang out. “That’s enough! Enough!”

The cabin door to the right cycled open, and as it did the creature—the knight—standing unseen in the hall flickered from invisibility. Armored all in chrome it was, its mirrored raiment shimmering, face concealed by a serenely human mask.

Holden flinched, fell back a step. “Excubitor!”

“Hold!” I said.

The slave-knight held no weapon. Its highmatter sword was in its holster. The active camouflage employed by the Knights Excubitor was designed to preclude human seeing. The Irchtani—while insensitive to red light like the Cielcin—possessed an oil membrane in their photoreceptors that made them far more sensitive to color differences and motion than we. The Excubitor might have been invisible even to my eyes, but to the birdmen?

For just a moment, I’d thought it an assassin, thought the creature had snuck aboard while Alexander accosted me on the ramparts. But the voice from the open cabin put an end to that fear.

“Are you hurt?” A woman clad in white emerged from the cabin, hands out, concerned.

“Selene!” Cassandra appeared by Holden at the end of the hall, clutching her unkindled blade in her hand.

The Princess Imperial turned at the sound of her name. “Cassandra!”

A smile lit my daughter’s face, and brushing past Holden—who had fallen to his knees at the sight of Her Highness—she rushed to embrace the other woman. Hearing my daughter’s delight, I unkindled my blade.

The Excubitor, Verus, had withdrawn, and stood against one wall.

“Your poor arm!” Selene said when they drew apart. “Whatever happened?”

“I’ll tell you all about it!” Cassandra said. “What are you doing here? Did you—”

“Selene.”

The princess’s face went grave at the sound of my voice. “My lord.”

Gone was the jeweled princess who had greeted me on the porch of her tower. Gone the rubies and diamonds, the diaphanous gown. In their place, she wore high boots, trousers, and a short jacket. All were of Imperial white. Her only concession to her rank and station was her belt: a band of bright gold about her trim waist, the shield generator gilded.

Doubtless she had sent the slave-knight to seek for me, but he had not counted on the Irchtani to spot her emissary.

“Holden,” I said, speaking past Selene. “Go to the bridge. Tell Ketevan to break warp and turn the ship around.”

Selene’s mouth opened, face fell. “You can’t!”

Her words froze Holden in his place.

“Abba, what’s going on?”

I offered the battered Irchtani a hand up. “Are you all right?”

The birdman opened his mouth. Beak not moving, he said, “I all right, yes.”

“Don’t take me back there,” Selene said.

“Princess Selene, your being here will be yet another reason for your brother and the Empire to hang me.”

“It won’t!” she said. “I’ve left a sealed holograph explaining myself. They’ll know this was my doing.”

I licked my lips. “And my *not returning* you will be *my* doing. Holden!”
The centurion lurched to his feet.

“Stay where you are, soldier!” Selene said. “I am Princess of the Aventine House, not this man!”

Holden fell back to his knees.

“Selene, you cannot stay here,” I said.

“I cannot stay there,” she said. “Hadrian, my father is dying.”

“I know that,” I said.

She spoke over me, words coming with the force of water from a mighty sluice. What she said fell on me like the tide, as though all great Neptune’s oceans were unleashed upon my unsuspecting ears.

“He has the Fleshing Plague.”

“What?” I don’t think any sound came out. “William?”

“He contracted it at Delgovicia,” she said. “He insisted on . . . on hearing petitions from the refugees himself—or so they told me. He was sick when I arrived.”

I was falling, had actually to catch myself on the wall.

“The plague?” a man’s voice rasped. My voice. So far away. “William?”

Out the corner of my eye, I saw Holden perform the sign of the sun disc.

“He doesn’t have long now,” she said, “all his doctors agree. He was old to begin with, but this . . . they’ve had to keep him in fugue. They last time they pulled him out was to speak to you . . . he worsens so quickly.”

I had a sudden vision then, my mind overtaken by memory. I saw again the poor fellow in the Minoan lab on Ganelon, his head swollen to thrice its proper side, his arm titanic, misshapen, a second forearm sprouting from his elbow.

“Hadrian.” Selene advanced a step, one hand toward me, the other at her breast. “I’ve no idea what will become of me when he is gone. I love my brother—and he loves me, I think . . . but he will need to set us aside. His siblings. He will send me home, or marry me to some marcher lord, or—let me come with you.”

“Is there still no cure?” I asked. “Have you seen him? Your father?”

Selene shook her head. “Fugue only slows it down. He is holding

himself together by sheer will, I think. Nicephorus tells me he can no longer walk . . . that he has lost the use of his right hand.” She was perhaps three paces from me then. “Hadrian, please.”

“Can’t she stay, Abba?” Cassandra interjected.

My eyes flicked to my daughter’s face, returned to Selene.

I looked at her, and at the princess in her traveling clothes.

“I . . .” My words came but haltingly. I had not told Cassandra the full truth, would not tell her then, nor would I tell Holden and the nameless Irchtani. “. . . will not return to the Empire when we are done.”

Selene nodded. “I know that,” she said. “Where then will you go?”

She pushed me onto the backfoot then, for just a moment. I looked to Cassandra. I had given her the story already. “When I was a prisoner among the Cielcin, they alluded to another race living in the uncharted regions beyond the core, toward galactic north.”

It was as good a story as any. If I did survive, it was just the sort of thing I *would* do.

If.

“Another . . . race?” Selene looked to the Irchtani, standing almost at her side. “Of xenobites?” I understood her expression plain. She wasn’t sure if I had invented them to give cover to the truth: that I planned to die in the coming battle.

“Yes,” I said, “The *Hakurani*, the Cielcin call them. They hunted them for sport, just as they hunt us. I will go and find them.” She was close again. I could smell the floral perfume of her hair. No hint of smoke or sandalwood. “I will not return to the Imperial stars.”

One hand reached out, made as if to touch my chest.

She pulled it back, both hands folded now before her as if in prayer. Her eyes were shining. “Then take me with you.”

Over her shoulder, Cassandra nodded, smiled.

Valka, forgive me.

“We are flying to war,” I said.

“I know that,” she said. “But I don’t care.”

“You will not see your family again.”

“I don’t care.”

“You may die,” I said.

“Hadrian,” she said, eyes alight. “Take me with you.”

I hesitated a moment, eyes darting to Cassandra, her smile fixed; to the Excubitor, Verus, its face unreadable. Holden still was kneeling, eyes downcast in the presence of the Blood of the God Emperor.

The Irchtani cocked its head.

“Very well,” I said at last, and offered her my hand, palm up.

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CHAPTER 29

BEFORE THE FIRE

WHAT CAN I SAY of that journey? That funeral procession across the stars?

Little. Less.

We rendezvoused with *Demiurge* at the preordained location—a trackless part of space several light-years from Gododdin system, another place no man had ever been, would ever come again. It was there that Kull’s ships—white hedrons, none more than a mile long—and Lin’s black vessels found us. They were days coming aboard. It is no mean feat to place so many ships in the holds of *Demiurge*, not least vessels so great as Lin’s *Tempest*, which—while not near so large as *Tamerlane*—was some five miles from stem to stern.

Lin had of course been aboard that dreadful ship once, long ago. He had killed Kharn Sagara there, in the garden where Aranata had taken my life, and we walked there once again, and there I told him of Valka’s *replica*, and showed him the barrow. I told him of Kharn’s Angelus Project, his attempts to duplicate my so-called *powers*.

“You said the Chantry has your blood as well?” he asked me, standing amid the purple lilies in the false and misty morning. “Do you think they will do the same?”

“I think they’ve already tried,” I said. “But they will fail, just as Kharn failed.” I knelt then, and touched one of Valka’s lilies. “What I am is not in my blood.”

“All my life,” he said, not challenging my claim, “I’ve said my prayers in sanctum . . . believed . . .” He stabbed the loam with his cane. “To think the priests were sorcerers . . .”

“They were never priests . . .” I said. “The Earth is only a place,

Bassander.” I peered out the glass roof at the rippling chaos of the stars. “If it is any consolation, your God Emperor was . . . like me.”

The old soldier flinched.

Lin sank down, seated himself on a fallen log. “How much of what we know is false?” he asked, voice very far away. “How much of our history?”

“Almost all of it,” I could only say.

Almost all of it.

It was many months before we arrived at Bracara, beyond Dion Station, on the fringes of the Centaurus Arm. There we lingered, on the edge of the system, to await the anticipated hammer blow.

The final battle.

What *should* have been the final battle—would have been the final battle . . .

But for Cassandra.

. . .

Weeks passed at Bracara. Months. At last word came that the Jaddian fleet had arrived at Gododdin. There they would stay, and coordinate with the main massing of the Imperial armada and its allies against the day of uttermost need. If I failed, it would fall to them to coordinate the defense. With their atomics, they might be able to disorder the patterns in energy that comprised the bodies—the subtle bodies—of Ushara and Miudanar . . .

. . . or be destroyed.

If we succeeded, Gododdin would become the nerve center of the new war effort. The *Cielcin Wars* would become the *Cielcin Hunts*, with Fort Din serving as the chief organ of human resistance. From there, our fleets would sail, one by one, and assault the scattered, divided enemy. No more would we cower on our planets, in our bunkers. No more would we rush across the stars in the hopes of striking the enemy before they were gone.

We would be huntsmen, stalking the forests of the night, hounding the Cielcin from their holes.

Predators again, at last.

But I *had* guessed rightly, and within a year of our arrival at Bracara . . . we were gone.

Dharan-Tun awaited us.

Dharan-Tun. And Dorayaica.

And its two rebellious gods.

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CHAPTER 30

DISTANT LIGHT

“IT ISN’T HERE . . .” I said, studying the holograph where it drifted ghostlike above the holography well before *Demiurge*’s iron throne. Looking *through* that projection, I addressed Orphan, the beast seated above us all. “Why isn’t it here?”

The dread titan was slow to answer me, the eyes of its flaxen-haired head rolled back, searching for answers writ upon the underside of its own brain.

“Might it have moved on already?” asked the Princess Selene, ever at my side. “Gone to support one of the other invasions?”

It was possible. Though the overthrow of a planet’s defenses might be accomplished in a day—in hours—the collection of the native population: the bombardment of cities, the excavation of subterranean shelters, the scouring of the hinterlands, the processing of prisoners taken to the human ranches . . . these might take years.

“Is it possible the war council misidentified Dharan-Tun’s telegraph signature?” asked Edouard, standing almost opposite me, near the pilot’s high seat.

“The instruments are clear,” said Orphan’s dark-haired face, a flicker of irritation on its ugly, squarish features. “Where the ship has gone, we cannot say.”

Its counterpart was silent, absorbed in communication with the black vessel.

“What do we do?” Cassandra asked.

Bassander Lin’s holograph shimmered where it stood. The man himself was aboard his *Tempest*, which was even then preparing to detach from the clamps in one of *Demiurge*’s countless vast holds. Sattha Kull stood just

beside him—himself aboard *Hetophal*, the Tavrosi flagship. “Our mission has not changed,” said the Strategos.

“Our mission *has* changed,” I said. “Our mission was to decapitate the Cielcin war machine. If Dorayaica is not here . . .”

“There are still two dozen Cielcin worldships in system,” Lin said. “There is still a planet to save.”

He was right, of course.

Rage is blindness.

I let my frustration ebb. “I cannot shake the feeling . . . that they knew we were coming.”

“If they knew we were coming . . .” Cassandra said, “why haven’t they attacked?”

Sattha Kull injected himself, saying, “They do not yet know we are here.”

“It is slightly more than two light-hours from our location to the planet,” Edouard said. “We’ve not been here long enough for our light to reach them.”

“By which time, *kmeng kona*,” said Sattha Kull, slipping into his Tavrosi for just a moment, “our attack will have already begun.”

As the grand admiral spoke, I turned my back on the projection, advanced toward the towering windows. It was not possible to see the planet at that distance, or the net of moons tangled about its waist. Still, it was there—out there, in the Dark.

Danu.

How strange that we should be drawn there—of all places, all worlds—the home of that other William, the friend I had cast aside.

Switch.

Wherever he’d gone after I banished him . . . I knew it was not to return to his home, to the place and people that had sold him into slavery and hard use when he was just a boy. I had never thought to see it, that sere world: gray-green, cloudless, and cold. But little it had figured in the annals of history, an obscure planet in an obscure corner of the outer provinces, a place of crags, of desert wind, of shriveled, algae-choked seas.

“They can’t have known we were coming, in any case,” said Saththa Kull, “’tis impossible.”

“It’s not impossible,” I said, my back still to the well. One of *Demiurge*’s silverfish drones orbited in front of me, and so doubtless registered my likeness and broadcast it to both *Tempest* and *Hetophal* at once. “The Watchers might have marked our approach.”

“The Watchers . . .” Saththa Kull almost sneered. I had shown the man the footage we had that had survived Sabratha, but he would not believe it. “We are prepared to deploy on your mark.”

“As are we,” Lin said.

Orphan’s high and lilting voice cut across the conversation. “The vessel was last seen in orbit above the planet,” it said. “It is vanished. Where it has gone, I cannot say, as I said—”

“—as I said—” One head turned upon the other.

“As we said.” The flax-headed one did not stir, had maintained its upturned gaze throughout all of that brief exchange unshaken, like a monk in a trance. “Until it transmits, it is hidden from us.”

I was still standing at the window then, my face nearly pressed against the glass. A terrible weight was on me, as though a yoke were laid across my shoulders. I had hoped to take Dharan-Tun unawares.

But it was gone—if it had ever been there.

For all we knew, the Cielcin fleet was itself already gone. We could only estimate their present location, generate projections on the basis of their last known trajectories. If they had chosen that minute to leap to warp, we would not know until they were hours gone, just as they could not see us until our light reached them.

How many of the stars we see, I wondered—have wondered countless times—are already dead and gone? Killed by the Watchers’ rebellion?

“We should prepare our attack,” Kull said, and from his tone I knew that it was me he appealed to. “You lead the way with these hell weapons of yours. Soften them up. Then Lin and I advance . . .”

I hardly heard him.

The fingers of my right hand caressed my left arm, feeling the long

bones there—the proper bones, still alien to me after so many centuries. That hand was not my own, but a gift the Absolute had given me. I could not feel the thin scar Dorayaica’s talon had made, not with my fingertips. But I knew it was there.

I could *call to them. To it.*

I’d known it might come to such a pass.

But could I do it?

It was one thing to enter hell by the front gate, quite another to invite it through your own. And I but little understood the mechanics of that higher world, that deeper world. Dorayaica had grasped my arm across tens of thousands of light-years. Might it have dragged me back with it to Dharan-Tun? Might it or Ushara have crossed all that void at a step and laid waste to us before we could resist? Would there have been any way for me to stop them if they had?

“They are too close to the planet!” Edouard objected. “If we destroy the worldships, we destroy Danu.”

“If that is the price we pay for victory . . .” Lin countered, his voice tense.

“Then it is too high, Strategos,” Edouard said.

I bestirred myself, turning from my contemplation of the unfixed stars. “Bassander Lin is right,” I said, inclining my head to the man’s quicksilver image. “The mission hasn’t changed. The Cielcin must be destroyed.” Ramanthanu and its kindred were even then standing guard outside. “These Cielcin must be destroyed. Their deaths will send a message to the enemy: This war has changed.”

“What about the people on the planet?” Edouard asked.

“What about the people on the worldships?” I asked, recalling the pits of Dharan-Tun itself: the slaves, the torment. Too clearly I remember the headless bodies mounted on hooks, the blood draining from them. Too well I can still see the corpses of men and women lying on the stone floor, their bellies burst open whence the Cielcin whelps had spawned. “We can offer them nothing but death.”

“But if we strike those ships in orbit, whatever is left *will* fall to Danu,”

Edouard said. “We’d be condemning everyone down there to certain death.”

“The boy is right,” said Sattha Kull Vhad Kvasir, image jumping as a data packet dropped. His voice broke, an artifact of the transmission. “We do not know how many people are alive down there.”

“If the answer were zero,” Edouard stood a little straighter, “the Cielcin would not still be here.”

Princess Selene turned to face me, asked, “How many people were there on the planet . . . before?”

I looked to Edouard. The young man could only shake his head.

“Doubtless millions, Your Highness,” said Bassander Lin.

Selene made the sign of the sun disc. “Millions?”

“There are twenty-four Cielcin worldships here,” said Bassander Lin. “Two dozen. That is hundreds of millions of their kind. If we cannot have Dharan-Tun, let us send them a message to shake their world.” His hands tightened about the shaft of his cane as though it were the neck of some gamebird, twisting. “Is the weapon prepared?”

Orphan answered, twin voices speaking in unison, “We are prepared.”

“How long until we are discovered?” I asked.

Orphan’s left face—the pale-haired face, eyes still rolled back—hesitated only a moment before replying. “Two hours, seventeen minutes, twenty-three seconds . . .”

The other head muttered, “Twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty . . .”

“Then the time to strike is now,” said Sattha Kull, fingering the heavy horn that pierced one elongated earlobe. I marked the clan *saylash* tattooed on the back of that hand, black on his golden skin. “This weapon . . . it is truly instantaneous?”

Orphan answered in its black basso profundo, “Darkness is faster than light.”

“No light,” its counterpart breathed, “no light. No beam. No true beam.”

They were talking about the *Darklight* weapons, the very sort I had given Aurelian when I had gone to Forum under the banner of truce. The weapon used dark energy to locally accelerate a region of spacetime—a ray perhaps as wide as a man’s arm. Within that region, the expansion of

spacetime was greater than outside, so that matter within was stretched and pulled differently. In empty space, the effect was nearly harmless. But when aimed at an object—any object composed of baryonic matter—the effects were devastating.

Orphan spoke true. The *beam* emitted by the *Darklight* cannon was no beam at all, though it slashed across the light-hours in seconds. It had no mass, no energy of its own. It was a kind of shadow, a consequence of the effect of the weapon's dark energies upon the foam of reality itself. The transitory differential in the rate of universal expansion—what the scholiasts call the *Hubble Constant*—caused a cleavage, as a fault in bedrock, so that whatever matter the beam passed through was stretched and warped.

No armor, no shield, no counteroffensive in the arsenals of men or Cielcin could stand against it. It would cut through shields as readily as adamant, cleave highmatter like gypsum.

The effect attenuated at around five light-hours' distance, lasted only so long as a heartbeat, but if—in that heartbeat—the affected region of space were to encounter, say, the fuel tank of a Cielcin worldship, there was nothing in creation that could stop it. The *Darklight* could punch a hole clear through a *planet*, destroying whatever it touched.

"The Pale won't know what hit them," I said.

"And we won't know *if* we hit them," said Bassander Lin, "not until the light reaches us."

"But the planet . . ." Edouard said.

"We can do nothing for the planet," I said sharply.

Edouard blanched, retreated half a step. Was that fear in his dark eyes? I felt abashed, ashamed, but I could not stray from the path. We were committed. We had to be.

I looked at Edouard, his boyish face and oiled black hair, his Delian accent polished and urbane, like the villain of some Eudoran melodrama. So like a certain other young man of Delos he was, so full of care, of hope. "You knew what we were riding out to do."

Kull and Lin both were silent, grave as stones. Selene's face was

downcast. Orphan only watched, a bemused expression on its black-haired face, the pale-headed one still rapt in communion with the mind of *Demiurge*. Edouard was ashen, a man of charcoal prone to crumble at the slightest touch. Cassandra was looking at him, looked at me, her face a tangle of love and pain.

“It is murder,” the younger man said.

“It is war,” I said, and addressed Orphan as I returned to my place before the well. “Prepare to fire on my mark.”

Edouard caught my wrist. “Hadrian, you can’t!”

I pulled my arm away, but Edouard would not release me. I expected to find him desperate, the man of ash crumbling in my hands. But he was iron, his dark eyes holding mine with the intensity of our first meeting.

I laid my hand on his. “I would save them if I could,” I said. “Even the Cielcin . . . if they can be saved.” I glanced in the direction of the door, where Ramanthanu stood guard. Returning my attention to the HAPSIS man, I spoke in a hushed voice. “You know what it is we face.”

“The Watchers are not *here*,” Edouard said. “And you are condemning that whole planet.”

“We condemn them if we do not fight,” I said, still holding the fellow’s hand in mine. “How many innocents were there on Vorgossos? How many millions?”

“That was different.”

“How?”

“We didn’t drop the sky on them.” Edouard’s eyes were shining.

“No,” I agreed. “We let the Latarrans butcher them on their Monarch’s orders, all so we could win this ship. If we do not *use* it as I have been commanded to use it, then we betray not only the people down there”—I pointed out the window in the direction of distant, unseen Danu—“but every one of them.”

I felt Edouard’s fingers slacken, and gently removed his hand from my wrist.

“If we strike the outermost ships in the swarm,” Bassander Lin

interjected, “the resulting shrapnel will fall toward the planet as its orbit decays. It may strike the other worldships *before* it can hit the planet.”

Sattha Kull was smiling. “And it may cause the other ships to break orbit.”

“Very good,” I said, looking to Edouard.

It was A2 that bobbed his head, the Empire man, not the Catholic.

“Good,” I said again, and raising my eyes to Orphan, I gave the order. “Fire at will.”

• • •

The *Darklight* weapon did not deploy like *Albedo* or *Artemision*. They were not a vessel in themselves. Instead, Orphan had commanded the *uthras* to install the weapons in the forecastle of *Demiurge* itself. I should have been able to see them from the windows of the bridge—they had been installed in certain of the towers below my high vantage point, but in truth the weapons were very small.

And their beams were invisible.

“Targets selected,” Orphan’s castrato whispered.

Demiurge itself spoke then, and when it did, it was with the same blackly resonant machine voice that Kharn Sagara himself had used. “Calculating current position on the basis of targets’ last known trajectories.”

Hearing that voice, black as thunder, deeper even than Orphan’s basso profundo, Selene jumped, fell against me. I caught her, held her close, whispered, “Easy now.”

A pause came, pregnant with the infant Death.

“Firing,” said Orphan, both mouths at once.

A terrible wailing filled *Demiurge* then, a high-pitched, keening scream, a rushing as of all the air in the vessel through the throat of some fell beast. How the weapons were so loud I could not say. Small though they were, the screaming of them filled all of *Demiurge*.

I looked out the forward windows, but there was nothing to see.

“Did I do right?” I said, half whispering to the princess. “Giving this weapon’s twin to the Empire?”

The wailing ebbed, but Selene said nothing.

“Did it work?” Cassandra asked.

“Firing sequence complete,” Demiurge declared.

Lin’s specter answered my daughter, “We won’t know until the light reaches us.”

Could I look? I wondered. Peer across the lighted Dark with the eyes the Quiet had given me, across space unrolled like a carpet before my feet? I dared not. To step upon the ground of that higher reality—then most of all—was to invite the attention of the Watchers.

“The battle has begun,” I said. “Lin. Kull. Prepare for deployment.”

“Master!” Orphan cried, crowned head glaring down at me. “There is a signal!”

“A signal!” its counterpart softly sang. “A signal, master. Master!”

“How is that possible?” I said, gently extricating myself from the princess, who yet clutched my arm. “The Cielcin can’t have broadcast to us so quickly.”

Edouard spoke up, unfolding himself from his place by the well to ask, “Telegraph?”

Orphan shifted where it sat, its countless gold chains tinkling in the near silence of the bridge, rough feet scraping the smooth metal floor. “It is not the enemy,” it said.

“It is the planet.”

“The planet?” I looked to Lin, to Edouard, half hoping to find an answer inked across one of their faces.

“Survivors . . .” Edouard said, and to his credit, there was no venom there, no triumph. There was only pain. “They can’t know we’re here. Not yet.”

Our light had yet to reach the planet.

“It can’t be for us,” Lin said, holograph flickering as he wrung his cane again. He seemed to glance at Kull a moment, but it was only a trick of the

projection. He was doubtless staring at some readout before him where he stood aboard *Tempest*. “Can you put it through?”

“Orphan?” I asked.

A hissing filled the bridge then, and a squeal that stabbed the ears. I pitied Cassandra—who could cover but one at a stretch.

“*Compensating*,” said *Demiurge*.

“—*ttack—Cielcin have . . . come. Maras—fallen—the Count—naged to escape det—tion . . . three thousand . . . repeats—post, Danu . . .*”

It was a man’s voice, rough, haggard, stretched thin as monofilament.

“Can you clean it up?” Edouard asked, orbiting the holograph well.

The centimanus did not so much as look at the HAPSIS man. The fingers of its two left hands adjusted the drape of its robe.

“Orphan?” Edouard was intent.

“Orphan!” I snapped.

One black eye peered at me through curtains of dark hair.

But the voice on the recording—which seemed to echo from every vault of the black ceiling—grew clearer, the noise diminishing as the ship’s sub-intellect rebuilt the damaged data.

What played then from *Demiurge*’s unseen speakers was crystal clear, perfect as a fly in amber, a slice of time reconstructed, made clean.

“*Message repeats:*” it started, “*this is Deepwater Outpost, Danu settlement sixty-seven degrees south, forty-one west. Eolderman Argo speaking, formerly centurion, nineteenth Centaurine, on behalf of my people. Tightbeam to out-system datanet relay, for transmit on all Legion bands. Danu is under attack. Repeat: Danu is under attack. The Cielcin have come. Maras has fallen, and the Count is dead. We’ve managed to escape detection. Ours is a small settlement, polar ice refinery. Three thousand people. We are cut off. We cannot last. Please. Help us.*”

Three thousand people.

I looked at Edouard, felt his black eyes hard as glass, not quite imploring.

“We have to save them.”

I looked round. It was not Edouard who had spoken. It was Cassandra.

The girl—the woman grown—was standing off to one side, near to one of Holden’s men, her hand on the hilt of her one remaining sword. Her jaw was set, her weight all on one foot, a fencer ready to spring.

“Abba, we have to.”

The battle had already begun, but there was nothing, *nothing* the Cielcin could do to retaliate. It was still hours before they could even see us. They might send out lesser ships to warp at random, distribute scouts about the system in a scramble to find our location, but the odds of their spotting even a ship so massive as *Demiurge* by random jump at two light-hours’ distance were not high.

Still, every moment was critical.

“This is not the time,” said Bassander Lin. “The battle is already joined.”

“We are prepared to deploy,” Sattha Kull agreed.

The plan had been for Lin’s fleet and Kull’s to effect a short-range jump from our location to Danu orbit, emerging behind the Cielcin worldships so as to shield the planet from the effects of the radiation gathered and released by the act of warp travel. They would engage the enemy directly, and relay telemetry to *Demiurge*, which could then pick its targets with the utmost care. Only when the backbone of the enemy fleet was broken would *Demiurge* come herself, screaming into orbit for the final battle with Dharan-Tun. Only then would I take the field myself, and storm the gates of the Dhar-Iagon with the support of my men and Lin’s legion and the Tavrosi *thathing*.

But Dharan-Tun was nowhere to be seen.

“We could take the shuttles,” Edouard said. “The shuttles are warp capable. Each can hold . . . three hundred? Maybe five?”

Orphan surely knew the answer, but as ever pretended not to hear any voice but mine.

The shuttles . . .

Shuttles was too small a word. Each was larger than *Ascalon*, was larger even than an Imperial Roc-class frigate—and *Demiurge* had *hundreds* of them. Each was black as the ship itself, and of like style: each a piece of

Gothic stonework snapped from the edifice of some vast and ancient temple, their surfaces covered in relief sculptures.

And each *lived*, possessing a will not unlike the will of *Demiurge* itself, a will not fully human, but greater than the will of any animal, understanding and producing human speech. After Kedron's attack on *Demiurge*, I had ordered one taken apart, and we had found the same horrors—the same sheets of human skin, neurons laid out beneath like the gilded lines of a circuit board, flush with the rosy glow of false blood.

“Abba?”

Jerking as if from sleep, I looked my daughter in the face. It was not for fear of those ships that I hesitated, nor from the crawling horror of them.

The hour had come.

My eyes found Selene, who alone of all our company knew what it was I had set out from Gododdin to do. Could she read what precisely there was etched then on my face? Did she understand why it was I hesitated?

Fear is death to reason, Gibson's voice whispered deep within me.

No, another voice rose up in answer, small and rough—unsure, unsteady. The voice of a little boy from Meidua now very, very far from home. *Not this time*.

This time, fear was reason itself.

There had been no time for fear at Sabratha. There had been time only for action, and by the time that action was done, a piece of Ushara—her fingerprint—had impressed itself on my increasingly addled mind.

But then? There? At Danu?

I could feel their blazing eyes—each like the knot in a fiery net cast across the universe, forever searching for me. Now that we had emerged from warp, the strange geometry of *Demiurge* was itself but pale protection, especially so near the outer hull.

I had a sudden vision then, half a memory. I saw Dorayaica enthroned, Ushara at its side, its flesh crumbling—half turned to stone. With the Watcher in its flesh, it bent its gaze over all creation, the galaxy unrolled beneath its feet. It could see the whole of its army at a glance, its dread armada racing across the heavens, falling upon world after world. It *must*

have seen the firing of the *Darklight* beam, must—if we had struck true—have seen the annihilation of our target.

Surely we had drawn its eye. Surely it would not be long before it spied us. When it did, the absence of Dharan-Tun would not matter. Ushara would be on us in instants, leaping cross the light-years . . .

. . . unless I drew those eyes to me.

“I will go to Danu,” I said at last, and marked the approval in Edouard’s face. “Strategos, Grand Admiral: You will engage the enemy, attempt to lure them into open space. I will take a number of our shuttles and effect a jump to low orbit. With any luck—with the Absolute’s blessing—we will rescue these poor people.”

Edouard stepped forward, face alight. “I’ll go with you!”

“*You*”—I thrust a finger in his direction—“will stay here and mind the bridge. I will take Holden, and the Irchtani, and—” I had been about to say *and Ramanthanu*, but the thought that I should take my three Cielcin to the succor of people so recently brutalized by the Cielcin stopped my tongue. “I will go, and see what I shall see.”

Forward. The word—the sound of it—seemed to rumble in my ears, a distant thunder.

Always forward.

Always down.

Time runs down.

The time had come. My time. My end. I would draw the Watchers to myself—draw them away from *Demiurge*—and so set my killing trap. I had seen the many futures—had seen the Quiet’s *shortest way*, that tide of light and fire washing over the stars. But I had seen a better path, a narrow way. I might destroy Dorayaica and its gods, and so free the Cielcin from their grip, redeeming them from ten thousand years of darkness—and more.

I would use *Voidmaker*, make myself the bait and target. I would wipe the Watchers from existence.

Ushara. Miudanar. And Dorayaica with them.

And myself.

CHAPTER 31

THE END OF A WORLD

DANU.

I watched it through the forward windows of the pilotless shuttle, its gray-green face growing ever nearer, its polar caps extending far into its middle latitudes. What little water there was lay confined to a necklace of little seas, the filled-in remnants of meteor impacts in the deeps of unrecorded time. It was a cold place, a hard place, with too little water and too little light, a place of endless, tepid winters and terranic evergreens.

“Is that . . . lava?” Cassandra asked.

“They’re pulling the planet apart,” I said, nodding. “Remember the earthquakes at Sabratha?”

Her eyes were all for the planet, but she nodded as she brushed past me, moving to stand near the windows. She had dressed in her armor—as I had dressed in mine. But where I wore my antique blacks, hers was a suit of Imperial white, segmented, articulated, close-fitting. Ghoshal’s men had modified the suit underlayment to accommodate her arm, and she wore the *mandyas* overtop, secured by its braided thongs.

“I’m coming with you,” she’d said, accosting me in the hall.

I had stopped, and turned—and Ramanathanu and its kin turned with me. I’d elected to bring them with me, after all. How she had glared at me then! Her hand once more upon her sword.

Selene had hurried out after her. I saw the princess’s big, emerald eyes shining over my daughter’s shoulder, knowing what it was Cassandra asked. She was close to tears.

“Cassandra . . .” I said. “Anaryan . . .”

“*Non tajru tua!*” she said, advancing half a step. *Don’t you dare!* “I am going with you, Abba.”

Could I refuse her? Would she suspect?

She already suspects. 'Tis why she asks.

The thought rang in me like a bell, and for a moment I stood still, just . . . listening. I could hear the music, faint, far off, fantastic. I must have closed my eyes, for I was cognizant of opening them, saw them staring at me. Cassandra. Selene. One resolute, the other despairing.

Could I send her away? Ramanthanu was there, and Egazimn and Otomno.

They might restrain her . . . though they had failed to do so once already.

And she might cut them down.

Take her with you. The voice in my head was not my own.

“All right,” I’d said, and saw Selene’s face go hollow. “Arm yourself. We leave at once.”

“I can’t see the ship we hit,” Cassandra said, drawing me back to the present.

“It’s on the far side,” I said. “There’s not much left of it. Annihilation blew most of the mass to less than atoms . . .” But Edouard was not wrong . . . what remained would still be enough to devastate the planet, when it finally fell down. That is . . . if it did not strike another of the orbiting Cielcin moons.

Behind us, Ramanthanu spoke, rough voice like iron nails on glass.

Cassandra looked to me to translate.

“It says that it has never seen so many ships attack a planet,” I said.

Cassandra’s face was pale as milk. “Can they really tear the planet apart?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I didn’t think so, the gravity of the planet itself was still far more attractive than the pull exerted by the Cielcin worldships. “But they don’t really have to . . .”

The nature of the attack betrayed a certain elevated level of sophistication in Cielcin thinking. With so many moon-sized vessels in orbit, it had perhaps hardly been necessary for them to bomb the planet. The sheer tidal stress exerted by the introduction of so many satellites shook

Danu to its foundations, as though all that world lay in the grip of some almighty hand that crushed it until it wept molten stone.

A six-fingered hand.

A White Hand.

Using the gravitation effect of their own ships to raze all of Danu to the ground had an elegance to it, a black genius.

"It's almost beautiful . . ." I said.

The planet was like an open wound, weeping molten stone.

"How long until we land?" Cassandra asked.

A flat and coldly female voice replied, "*Response: Twenty-two minutes, seventeen seconds to landfall.*"

The air was stale, and bitter cold, untouched by the breath of living organisms for perhaps thousands of years.

It tasted like a tomb.

"The moment we land," I said, looking to Cassandra, "I want you and Annaz to try and find the survivors."

The girl looked over her shoulder, eyed Ramanathanu with cold suspicion. "Why did you bring them?" she asked, using Jaddian.

I looked the xenobite captain in the face. Ramanathanu's nictitating membranes flicked over its round eyes. It tilted its head. I could not tell her the real answer, that it and its kinsmen were to stand by me at the last.

"Because I trust them."

"*Tathiqas loron?*" Cassandra hissed. "Trust them? Abba, have you forgotten what they are?"

"They have given me no reason to distrust them, not since Sabratha."

Cassandra's eyes hardened. "You mean since they killed those prisoners? Since they raped that poor woman to death?"

I shut my eyes. "I need their help."

"*Limadha?*" Cassandra demanded.

"Because I cannot trust even Ghoshal's men any longer," I said, eyes darting to the three xenobites. "Not really. Not after . . . after Douro. Any one of them might have been bought by my enemies . . . we are playing a very dangerous game, girl." Cassandra's face seemed almost green in the

light thrown off by the planet outside. “Have you forgotten how things were at Gododdin? How tense? And we took the princess—don’t forget that.”

Cassandra shook her head. “We didn’t take her. She brought herself.”

“That won’t matter to the court,” I said. “You remember how Lin reacted when he learned she was here?” I could still remember the look on his face, his shock and horror to learn that he had—albeit unwittingly—been a party to the self-kidnapping of one of the Blood Imperial.

Cassandra’s brow furrowed, “You don’t trust the strategos?”

“Lin?” I turned away, back to the window, to Danu, and my fate. “Him I trust. It’s all the others . . . his men, Ghoshal’s men, the Tavrosi . . .”

“The Tavrosi aren’t what I expected,” Cassandra said. “Was *Amma* like that?”

“Like what?” I asked.

Cassandra shook her head. “Kull says he’s not a lord, but he sneers like one.”

I laughed—the sound of that laughter startled Ramanathanu and its ilk. “The Tavrosi say they have no lords,” I said, agreeing with her, “but in my experience, they all think they’re lords themselves. Your mother . . .” I trailed off. The truth was, Valka had herself been little different at the first, when we both were young. She had looked on the court at Emesh and upon all Imperial society with aristocratic disdain, uncompromising in her convictions, her belief in what was right. How I had admired that in her, who myself disdained the Imperium, who had never fully belonged in it, to it. “Your mother had her sharp edges, that can’t be denied. But if she were here, Grand Admiral Kull would step more lightly, I think. She thought as much of titles like *grand admiral* as she did of *lord*.”

The thought halted me, and I wondered how it was that a society that eschewed rank, despised division and distinction, could justify the existence of military rank.

I knew the answer, of course: because they had no other choice.

Even the Absolute and his servants have their hierarchy.

“*Oretonoyu o-kousun’ta ne?*” asked Ramanathanu. It had to stoop in the

confines of that space built for human bodies, lest it scratch its horns upon the ceiling.

“*Veih*,” I said, responding in Cielcin, and corrected myself. “I don’t think they’ve seen us.” The truth was, I’d no notion how the black vessel functioned.

As if in answer, a light flashed in the distance, above the limn of the world.

“Is that us?” Cassandra asked.

“Lin and Kull,” I said. “The battle is joined.”

The Imperial and Tavrosi fleets had leaped into action, warping as we had warped the short two light-hours from *Demiurge*’s location.

The hull shook as we scratched the roof of the sky. “We’re beginning our descent,” I said. Air ignited about us, so that the whole of the forward window was fretted with golden fire. I steadied myself, seized the rail that ran across the window, and for a moment felt myself Apollo, driving my chariot across the heavens, bringing light and fire.

We bled speed, arcing far across the world below, over scrubland and tundra and low mountains. Danu had no moons, and so had no mountains, only little hills like the worn-down teeth of old horses. Snow covered much of the world, and where its coverlet did not lie, there were mossy stones and gray grasslands, and the ruins of cities turned to slag.

“I think you were right, Abba,” said Cassandra, peering down at the blasted lands beneath. “I don’t think there’s anyone left . . .”

“There’s someone left,” I said. We had dropped well into the atmosphere by then, though still the world rolled far beneath us. I could see miles of ruptured earth, the very rocks weeping lava like blood.

“Do you think it could be a trap?” she asked. “Some trick of the Cielcin?”

The Cielcin *had* laid a trap for me once before. At Padmurak. And at Samarra, when I was half a boy, they had used human slaves to lure us out into the open. It was possible such a thing had been done again.

“It could be a trap,” I said, “or there are three thousand people there who need our help.”

• • •

The wind keened through the open arch as the ramp descended, whistling with the thin and feminine voice of winter. The earth shook beneath our feet, and reaching out I caught the lip of the airlock. The other six of the frigate-sized shuttles we had brought from *Demiurge* were landing—two already had—settling on a nearly flat shelf of ice and rock beneath an outcropping of dark stone.

I could see the planet's primary low on the horizon. Danu's secondary, a common red dwarf, lay high in the sky and remote, smaller than the nail of my smallest finger.

"That's the refinery?" Cassandra asked, voice carrying over the comms patch. She had donned her helmet. I had not, and drank the bitter cold of that polar clime. I wanted them to see me, the survivors. To see a human face, to hear a human voice.

Ramanthanu and its ilk had remained on the shuttle at my urging.

"Your time will come," I told it, taking it aside. "If I am right."

The lop-horned captain had accepted this without question.

"That's the refinery!" I shouted. I pointed at a series of red-painted stacks, rude steel girders and long, low buildings connected by insulated pipes, their walls adrift in snow. "The village is that way, if the scans are right!" I swept a finger from left to right. "Cut into the ice."

"*Bashanda!*" Annaz's voice crackled in my ear. "*I see no ships. No towers. No Pale. We are alone.*"

"It's the sun," I said in answer. "The *suns*, I mean. They don't set at this latitude. If there is better hunting away north, the Cielcin won't come here . . . not unless the people here are the last in all the world." Strange how so obvious a fact is not obvious until one's feet are firmly on the ground.

A block of soldiers in Imperial white and crimson appeared from the next landing frigate. "My lord!" Their centurion raised a hand. It was Holden. "Anything on comms?"

I shook my head. "We only just arrived."

“Shall I broadcast?”

“Sound the horn,” I said. “Let these people know the sons of Earth have come.”

In years to come, that pronouncement would be mutated, maliciously transcribed.

The Son of Earth has come, they would say I said. One of Holden’s men must have survived all that was to come and whispered.

History drops from my fingers, spills from my lips like wine. Stories are like serpents, twisting in our hands—like songbirds, never returning once set free. I had long ago become a story, long ago ceased to be a man. In years to come—in years now past—they would say I styled myself thus. The Son of Earth. The One Reborn. The God Emperor Come Again. There are those who call me this now, who kill and are killed in my name . . .

But I am something else, said something else.

I am not the One Reborn, not the Chosen, the Son of Earth.

I am only a herald, the servant of my outer god.

I sent *my* herald forth then, sounding his horn in that desert of ice and stone, and the very world trembled. In the sky above, I could see the dim shapes of Cielcin ships—false moons and hollow, shell-white in the colorless sky. A flash of light, a blossom of red fire. One of the ships was hit. I could not see Lin’s vessels, not at that great distance, for even the *Tempest* was too small to be seen from the ground with the naked eye.

“I feel like we should *hear* it,” Cassandra said, looking up beside me. “The battle.”

“I know,” I said.

For a moment, the only noise was the whistling polar wind. The herald’s horn blast sounded once more, rebounded off the ice, off the steel mass of the water plant. I spied a cargo dirigible—long neglected, half-deflated, on the far side of the low buildings, its silvered skin flashing in the suns.

“Men of Danu!” The herald’s artificially amplified voice rang out. “We heard your call! The Sons of Earth have come! The Halfmortal has come! Show yourselves!”

The homes of the villagers—the water miners—were sunk into the ice

and rock itself, I could see the rims of deep pits, metal silos cut or melted into the quarried surface of the world, looking like the mouths of blast pit cothons, little craters, none more than fifty or sixty cubits in diameter. The men of Danu lived in tunnels, in *smygels* beneath the ice.

“They’re beneath us,” I said.

And right on cue, they appeared.

A hand emerged from the lip of one of the nearer *smygels*. Another. Then a face followed, a man. Red haired he was, red bearded, his pale skin chapped and windburned.

“Who goes there?” he shouted, hands in the air. “Did you say the Halfmortal?”

For a moment, I’d felt a pang at the sight of that red hair.

It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

And it wasn’t.

The voice was not the voice of my old friend, even in age. It was the voice of the man in the recording. The eolderman, Argo.

“I am!” I said, stepping forward.

The man looked at me, long and hard. “The Halfmortal is old, and a traitor they say.”

“What I am is a man with seven ships, each large enough to hold several hundred. You are three thousand. If you come now, we can save you.”

More hands, more heads appeared from the lips of the surrounding *smygels*. Men, women, children. Their faces were drawn, bloodless, almost translucent, as if I could see the pain shifting beneath the surface of each. They had been nearly a year in hiding, nearly a year underground, praying the Cielcin did not spy them, send troops into the polar south, or simply rod the site from orbit.

And they—all of them—had red hair.

It was as if a hundred ghosts of my friend, Switch, were looking back at me.

“You’re . . . really here to save us?” asked one of the others, a matronly woman with a round but not unlovely face.

“You’re really . . . him?” asked Argo. “Lord Marlowe?”

The name was taken up by the inhabitants of the *smygels*, until it seemed almost a part of the omnipresent wind.

Marlowe. Marlowe. Marlowe.

“There is no time for this, sirrah!” I said. “We must go now!”

The sky was filled in that moment with the flash of atomic fire. Lin’s men or Kull’s had hurled the thunderbolt. It would not be long, I knew, before *Demiurge* fired again, relying on the better telemetry relayed to them via *Ascalon*’s telegraph.

“It was you, then?” Argo said. “That destroyed their moon?”

“It was,” I said. “We’ve a weapon that may change our fortunes in this war. Will you come with us?”

Argo of Danu did not answer at once. Beneath our feet, the planet trembled, tangled as it was in the Cielcin net. “Never expected help,” he said, almost under his breath. I had to strain to hear him. “Not from the *Empire*. All they ever do is *take*. Take our monies, our metals . . . our food, if they’re hungry. Take our boys to fight the Pale—hells, they took me when I was a boy. Left my girl with one on the way . . . never saw her again. Or the kid. A little boy, they say. Came home to thirty-three great-grandchildren, and then only because I lost my leg . . .” I marked the ungainly way he mounted the rim of the *smygel*. His left leg was false, a spring-loaded prosthetic.

Cassandra shifted at my side.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We’ve come to take as well. But we will take *you*, not *from* you.”

Argo wore a pair of mirrored goggles on his forehead. His eyes—green as those of the Emperor himself—were deep set, sunk in a morass of wrinkles from so many years of squinting against the gleaming ice. “No catch?”

“You were the one who sent the distress beacon,” I said. “I might as well ask you the same. I’ve known the Pale to set traps with their slaves.”

The eolderman bridled. “You think me one of their *scarheads*? Do I look like one of them Pale-loving shitlickers?”

I smiled, despite the desperation of the hour. For a moment, it was as

though Pallino lived again. Strange that this man should serve to channel not just one ghost, but two.

Privately via the contact patch, Cassandra whispered, “Scarheads?”

I’d never heard the term before, but I could guess its meaning. “Cielcin-worshippers,” I said. I had met such creatures in the dungeons of Dharan-Tun. Abruptly I recalled the scarred mute that had stolen my rings from me whilst I hung from the gates of the Dhar-Iagon. I was surprised to find the memory stirred no pain in me, no horror.

The Absolute had taken all that pain away. In its place, there was only pity.

“No,” I said to the eolderman. “You don’t. Forgive me.”

For the space of perhaps three breaths, he did not stir, only looked at me, lips parted. Presently, he shook himself. “All right,” he said, stepping aside to permit two of his compatriots—both women—to emerge from the *smygel*.

“You’re really here to . . . take us away from here?”

Cassandra stepped forward, answered the villager woman to woman. “Go and gather your people. Tell them to bring only what they can carry and to meet us here!”

Distantly I heard several human voices shouting, relaying the news that salvation had come.

“We should have them queue, lord,” Holden said. “There’s like to be a rush.”

“There’s room for everyone,” I said.

“You really punch the Emperor?” Argo asked.

I looked round, felt a strange smile steal across my face. Not Ushara’s rictus grin, nor the calculated smile of a lord playing the groundlings. Not Hadrian Marlowe’s smile, crooked and tacked roughly in place. It was the smile not of Hadrian of Delos, but of Had the myrmidon, centuries dead. “I slapped him.”

The grin on Argo’s face widened. “Slapped him?” he looked round at his companions. “The Emperor? Knocked the crown right off his head, did you?”

“He doesn’t wear a crown,” I said, gesturing. “Just a little circlet.”

Argo’s smile faltered, and I sensed that I was losing him. Looking to Cassandra, I said, “He insulted my woman.”

The eolderman nodded gravely. “They say she’s dead.”

“She is,” I said. “This is my daughter, Ca—”

At that precise moment, a third sun blossomed over Danu, brighter than the other two. Seen with the eyes of Holden’s suit cameras—played later—that sun started as a crimson bud, a sprout on the face of one of the looming Cielcin moons. It swelled like the cap of a mushroom. Like a mushroom, that new-sprouted sun sank its feelers into the gray moon in which it had taken root, and there wakened a fire greater still.

Fire. Light.

A sea of antihydrogen.

The red bud was consumed in an instant, devoured by the white blossom it had found.

One explosion caused the next. A chain reaction.

Demiurge had found another target, and the *Darklight* weapon had cleaved through one of the fusion cells that fed the worldship’s continent-sized engines. Matter and antimatter collided in an instant, and the whole of that alien world was blown to photons.

To photons . . . and shrapnel, each fragment a future world-killer, a meteorite in the making.

Seen without the aid of Holden’s cameras, the sky was simply filled with light. The villagers cried out. Many hurled themselves to the ground—still others were struck blind. I might have been one of them, but for happy chance. Still, the light was agonizing, white and clean as porcelain. I shut my eyes, but that was hardly any relief.

Cassandra was right . . . we *should* have been able to hear it.

There should have been the roar of thunder, should have been a blast to shake my bones and a ringing in my ears. Instead there was nothing, nothing but the pain and sudden screams of the poor villagers who happened to be looking up at the wrong moment. I heard Argo cry out, and curse so foully he might have reddened the ears of Pallino himself. I

thanked the Absolute that most of the Danuans were yet down in their *smygels*, and safe.

The new sun died as swiftly as it was born, fading to binary daylight.

“Abba?” Cassandra’s hand was on my shoulder, my face. “Abba, are you—?”

“Fine,” I said, and focused on her visored face. My vision swam, eyes smarted, tears near frozen upon my cheeks. “I can see.”

She crushed me to herself. “*Ya Parvara!*” she said, one of the names of the Jaddian Lord of Wisdom. “*Gratsa, Deu!*”

“The villagers?” I said, and turned, vision resolving slowly. Argo had fallen to the ground, lay in the snow, both hands to his eyes. The world spun about me—I was disorientated, stumbling. “Holden?”

The centurion answered at once, “Here, lord!”

“Get the wounded on the ship at once! Have we a medic?”

“Two at least,” the centurion said. His suit had cut out his vision when it detected the light, saved him—saved all my men. “But they can’t treat this . . .”

“Tell them to try!” I tugged the coif up over my head and hair, thumped the controls to deploy my own helmet. The casque closed about my face like an iron flower refurling, and an instant later, my vision winked on, and I hurried to the downed eolderman. “Master Argo!”

The bearded man’s hands scrabbled, found my own. “You call this a rescue?”

“You’ll be seen to,” I said, voice amplified by the suit, darkened, deepened. “I swear it.”

“That’s what they always say,” said he. “Promised me a new leg, too.”

“You’ll have it,” I said.

Argo looked at me, eyes like milk, face wet with tears already turning to frost. “Promise of a lord’s worth less than the air it moves,” he said.

“Then it is well I’m no lord,” I said, still blinking.

“Saying so don’t wash the blue out that blood of yours. You talk like a lord, man,” the eolderman said, and permitted me to help him to a sitting position.

“Can you stand?”

“Sure enough . . . damn!” He cursed. “Double damn! I can’t see a blasted thing.” His hand found his forehead, the heavy goggles there. He swore again. “Right on my fucking head! Right there!” He tore them off. “Just my luck! Mama always said sinning’d make you blind. Don’t think this is what she meant.”

Two of Holden’s men hurried forward to help. I clapped the man on the shoulder. “These men will get you aboard. Will you be all right?”

Blind Argo looked at me—and for an instant, I felt sure the man could see. “You can really save my people?”

“Yes,” I said, certain as I answered him that it would be among the last things I ever did. “Master Argo, I—”

What?

I felt that I should say something, something meaningful, something that would last, would be remembered. Here was one who would remember them. An old man, an old man who would spend the rest of his life saying how he was one of the last men to see the Halfmortal alive.

“I saw him once,” old Argo would say. “Just once . . . just for a moment. The Halfmortal, Hadrian Marlowe himself. He stayed behind, stayed on the planet, sent us all away . . . even his girl.”

He would never understand what it was I’d done, how it was I ended the war then and there, on his world of all worlds. Obscure, snowbound Danu. No one would. There would be questions. Stories. Fancies. Wild tales and melancholy. Why would Marlowe, who had survived so many battles—so many terrors—remain behind to die on that dying world?

Argo was looking at a spot three paces to my left. “My lord?”

What could I say?

And so we set about organizing the extraction of the settlement. The Danuans emerged from their *smygels*. Men and women, the very young and very old, whole families—nigh all of them with the same flaming red hair. On Danu—so I was later told—it was said that the red hair was a sign of bastardy. That every one of them was descended, but ten generations or ten dozen, from the royal house itself. Red hair, so the magi teach us, is a

recessive trait, washed out by the presence of other blood. Not so on Danu, where the redlings pass their coloring to their children in almost every circumstance.

It wasn't natural, so the other locals said, and shunned them.

They were outcasts.

Switch had never spoken of this. Not once. Not ever.

It was no wonder he hated the palatine caste. They had, quite literally, made him what he was, and he had paid the price for it all his days. It was for his resemblance to the Blood Imperial that he'd been sold to the pleasure barge that had ultimately brought him to Emesh.

I saw his shadow in every face I passed.

I climbed down into the *smygels* with a portion of Holden's men, shouting for the people to move. There were those who resisted, withdrew into inner rooms.

"Should we extract them, my lord?" asked one man.

I stared at the rusted steel, fist still on the lintel where I'd hammered for the space of several seconds. Finally, I turned my back, shook my head. "If we force them, we'll only start a panic," I said. "Leave them. We cannot save them all."

"But . . ." The man hesitated. "My lord?"

"If you start with knocking down doors," I said, looking to the poor fellow—an honest, ordinary man of the Sabrathan Defense Fleet, trapped with me by circumstance, carried so very far from his desert home, "you will end with shooting people." The man hesitated. I brushed past him. "Leave them, soldier."

Someone was shouting about eye protection—nearly all the locals had goggles, heavy welding goggles of the sort Argo had neglected to wear, or else slitted snow goggles not unlike the kind the Cielcin wore when forced to go beneath the light of suns.

Eyes . . .

I could feel *their* eyes, like distant flames. They were close. They were *watching*.

"Not yet . . ." I whispered. "Not now . . ."

I halted by a pin board erected in the corridor. It showed printouts, notices and reports for the Danuan natives. A prayer card pinned in one corner depicted an icon of Eleos—Mercy—with open hands and leaking breasts, half concealed by a yellowed reminder of airship arrival dates, deadlines the water miners had to meet.

I halted, transfixed by something half papered over by a notice reminding the inhabitants to check their weather seals and plumbing insulation.

It was a child's drawing, garishly colored, rudely formed, almost silly—but earnest. True.

I recognized the black armor, the white faces, the horns—and lifted the notice, the better to see what my fellow artist had left there for all to see.

The crinkled image showed the Cielcin—four of them or five—with wicked horns and curving sabers red as blood. They were strangely square, squashed by the little artist's poor sense of proportion—almost they made me smile—but there was a terror in them unlike the terror of any holograph. No hand so small should know of such creatures . . . should have to know of them. But it was not the Cielcin that held my attention.

For standing opposite them was a lonely figure—dressed also in black. He held aloft a gleaming sword—deep blue on the yellowed leaf. Behind him stood the rough shapes of men and women—all with red hair. Some mother, no doubt, had pinned it there. There was no caption, no title, no word. Just that crude image . . . left there that I might see.

The hero's eyes were green.

Whatever hesitation there was yet in me boiled away, became vapor, the smoke of sacrifice. A burnt offering.

It was time.

Back on the surface, Cassandra was helping to direct the villagers to one ship or another. Holden and his men struggled to keep order.

"There's room enough for all!" the centurion was shouting. "Room enough! Families, stick together! But if you're separated, don't worry—we're all going to the same place! Hey! Hey!" I saw his red-armored form

descend from the ramp of the nearest frigate shuttle, hands raised to push two women apart. “No fighting! There’s room, you hear?”

I stood apart, fingering the device I had carried with me down from *Demiurge*, the black cylinder no larger than a pen. It was Edouard’s transmitter, the micro-telegraph by whose properties I had signaled the blast that killed Brethren.

Its twin was in Orphan’s hand that very moment, awaiting my signal.

“Separate ships!” Holden was saying. “This one, there! That one, over there!”

The planet shook, men and women staggered on the ice.

“Get the Irchtani down here,” I said, comm whispering in Holden’s ear.

The birdmen swooped upon us, alighting on the ice, on the raised lips of the *smygel* craters, on the black ships themselves. The Danuans drew back, cursed, having not seen the coloni in the air above us. “They’re with us!” Cassandra said. “They’re our friends!”

“They’re aliens!” said one of the men, using the common word.

Tension. Hesitation.

The world shook, and lightning flashed beyond the sky. I saw an orb of fire—bright almost as the red and distant sun—flower and fade.

“They are not Cielcin!” said Cassandra, shouting over the throng. “They are our allies!”

“Are any of the ships ready to go?” I asked, speaking directly to Holden.

The centurion was a moment replying. “Manas counts four-fifty-two in number five.”

“When he gets to five hundred, have him stop,” I said.

A red light shone then, cut across the ice fields away to our south, painted a line from the quarries to the rusting metal piles of the water refinery. An instant later, it was gone.

“Abba?” Cassandra’s voice was in my ear. “What was that?”

“Targeting laser,” I said. “They know we’re here.” My heart was in my chest. If they had decided to shell the site from orbit, we were all of us already dead. “Into the ships!” I roared. “Everyone, double quick!”

Our only hope was inhuman greed. If the Cielcin detected the number of

human beings on the ground—if they were hungry—there was a chance they would send ground forces. If they did that, we had a few minutes. Ten. Five. Less. If they'd fired shells . . . we had even less.

I keyed the ship's frequency as Orphan had taught me—it felt monstrously unclean to address the daimon direct. "Ship!" I said. "Activate shields!"

I could see the almost heat-shimmer of energy curtains flickering to life. As if in answer, all Danu shuddered, and another beam of grainy laser light strafed across us where we stood. That almost certainly meant guns had not been fired. The beam took in our shuttles, the throng standing on the snow.

"Onto the ships!" Holden roared, and his men with him, one after another until a chorus of soldiers were shouting. "Move! Move!" The tide of humanity surged forward, rushing the ramps. The Irchtani all took wing.

I hardly noticed.

My attention was on things *higher*. Higher than the clouds, than the false and encircling moons, higher than the distant stars.

If you have ever stood in a crowded place, and seen a familiar face far off through the shoals of passing men, and been certain—two hundred paces distant—that his eyes were on you . . . then you will know something of how I felt then.

For an instant, time itself stood still, though men and women rushed about me, and the very earth quaked in the Cielcin grip. As I could not hear the battle beyond the sky, I could no more hear the crush of men, their desperation; could no longer hear the cry and shout of men and of Irchtani on my comms. All the world was drained of color, seemed to me strangely flat, as if those ice fields, our shuttles, the *smygels*, that rusting refinery with its sagging dirigible, were all a relief carving like those upon *Demiurge*.

Across it all *fell the shadow*.

A shadow no other eye could see.

That shadow fell not upon the world of dust and atoms, but across the vasty breadth of time. Seeing it, I looked back, down, and saw Cassandra through the press of all that mad humanity, saw her chivvied along by Holden and one of the Irchtani, overmastered.

Had she seen me?

It did not matter.

It had seen me.

I had two choices then: I could try to hide myself, hurl myself down into the snow like an insect scuttling from under an overturned stone . . . or I could stand tall.

“Holden,” I said, “get the ship loaded and go.”

“My lord?” asked the centurion. “What of you?”

I did not answer him.

All about me, the shadow was lengthening, cast by no light that I could see.

How shall I explain it? For you . . . who cannot *see*? I have said already that it was as if our world were squashed, flattened about my feet, as though I were walking across a vast relief carving. All Danu seemed to shrink and stretch, as though our ships, the refinery, the sagging airship all were stage decorations to be folded and packed away until everything was smooth as glass to me.

Across that flatness, the shadow moved, rising like a mountain from the sea.

Then it was gone, and I was standing alone on the ice, perhaps a hundred paces from where I’d been—though I must have taken only a dozen hapless steps. The air was filled with the whine and roar of repulsors, of engines just beginning to fire, and looking back toward the *smygels*, I saw the first of our ships rising into the gray air.

I did not stop to watch it go, rising over the village and the refinery and out over the seeming-endless ice. I kept walking. I was eager to put as much distance between Cassandra and myself as may be, knowing that it was already too late.

“Think you that you could hide forever?”

The voice that chased me across the ice was high and cold as the wind, but weak—terribly weak.

I stopped walking.

I had expected to hear it, and still the sound of that hated voice—half-

remembered—filled me with dread. I did not turn. To turn would be to make it real.

Halāqam ul telê.

I grew tense. Edouard's transmitter was in my hand, mightier than any sword.

"I told you once, long ago . . ." The inhuman voice drew nearer. I heard the sounds of feet on the ice.

Click. Scrape. Click. Scrape.

"Long ago . . ."

Nābutam ul telê.

"I told you . . . that *time runs down*. Did I not?"

Still I did not turn.

Click. Scrape. Click. Scrape.

Silence.

The beast had stopped.

Kashadam ul telê.

"You did," I said in answer, and turned to face my enemy.

To face Syriani Dorayaica.

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CHAPTER 32

DREAMER AND DECEIVER

SYRIANI DORAYAICA.

There it stood, beneath the flaming sky, black cloak floating on the air. The Watcher resident in its flesh had continued its slow work: It was as though a statue had spoken to me, the relic of some other time, a gargoyle left in rain. I could see the cracks in the Prophet's face, its skin turned half to stone. The tangled horns that rose from its brow had many of them snapped and crumbled, and its shoulders seemed hunched, its back bent at an angle strange to me beneath the beetle-black armor and flowing robe.

"Utannash has unmade you," it said to me, "has made you something else."

I could not help but smile. I found a strange peace had settled in my chest. The fear I had felt at the falling of the shadow had passed, and I was not afraid.

"I am myself alone," I said.

"*You* may be," said Dorayaica. "But Hadrian Marlowe is dead."

Long live Hadrian Marlowe . . . I thought, but did not say, said instead, "You should talk."

Dorayaica gestured as if to spread its hands. Only the right arm extended, the left—the hand I had shattered on our last meeting, the hand turned almost entirely to stone—remained crabbed at its side. "I shall become a god," Dorayaica said, "whereas you are a slave."

"Your god is a parasite," I said. "It is eating you alive."

Dorayaica's teeth flashed. As it moved, flakes of skin like stone scales sloughed from its cheeks. A rivulet of blood black as ink ran like a tear an inch beneath one dark eye. "We are one flesh, the Dreamer and myself. One will."

“Its will,” I said.

“Do you not do your god’s will?” Dorayaica asked.

Danu shook beneath us, but Dorayaica was unmoved. Was it truly present? Or was it only some projection, an eidolon cast cross the stars by the Watcher’s will?

“You pretend that there is some difference between us”—Dorayaica dabbed at its bleeding cheek with one still functional finger—“but in this we are the same: We do what we are asked to do. We differ only in our *whys*. You would preserve this . . . wretched existence—this *lie*. I will raze it to atoms, and less than atoms.”

Edouard’s transmitter was yet concealed in my fist. But the time was not yet right. I looked past my enemy to where my ships still lay at anchor. *Go*, I urged them, *go*.

“The only difference,” I said, “is that your gods are not gods, kinsman. Utannash *made* them.”

“Utannash *lies*!” Syriani said.

Sarrātim . . .

Doaloth . . .

Miudanar’s voice was like distant thunder, like the music of the Absolute, ever-present, half-unheard.

“They are his creatures,” I said. “His servants.”

“You are deceived.” Dorayaica’s smile split its calcifying flesh further, so that another tear rent its skin, another tear of blood ran blackly to its chin. “Utannash is one of *them*, the least of them.”

For all its villainy, I do not believe the Cielcin Prophet capable of falsity. Not once in all my memory had that Prince of Princes *lied* to me. But it had been lied to. By Miudanar. By Ushara.

Had not Ushara herself shown me her rebellion?

She had chosen her shape not only to arouse my desire, but to provoke my pity, to twist my chivalric impulse to my own destruction. In so twisting, she had shown me the truth—the truth Ragama had corroborated: that Ushara and her kind were in open rebellion against their designer.

“Your god will kill you, Dorayaica,” I said.

“My god will kill *death*,” it said, “and time. And everything.” It lowered its head as it spoke, broken horns pointed at me in token of threat. “But my god and I are one. His victory is *my* victory, and I will enter into Iazyr Kulah in his arms, and all my slaves after me. We alone escape this prison-universe, and enter into one of *their* making.”

I should have felt hatred, looking on that hateful face . . . but hearing its faint and wheezing voice, I pitied it—but pity would not stay my hand. Away in the distance, another of my black ships was rising into the air.

“*Number Four is away . . .*” Holden’s voice crackled in my ear, followed by the chatter of other voices. Irchtani fighters still turned in the sky, circling like sheepdogs.

Tracking my eyes, sensing my disquiet, the Prophet of the Cielcin said, “You have thrown your life away for these . . . creatures. These slaves.”

“They are not slaves,” I said. That much was true. They were less than slaves. They were outcaste. Mutants. Lepers in all but name.

“You were wise to hide from us . . .” Dorayaica swayed, steadied itself. “. . . all these years. You could not hide forever, but you end your hiding . . . for this? For these? You are so much *more* than they are. You are *his* instrument. You are the cornerstone upon which all this stands.” Here it raised its right hand, and lo! Blood wept from cracking fingers. “The singularity about which all this is anchored. I will cut you down, and *he* will never be.”

Holden’s voice hissed and spat in my ear as all Danu rocked beneath us.

I could not cut the comm without revealing Edouard’s transmitter—without taking my thumb from the trigger.

I opened my helm instead, tugged the coif from my hair and peeled the patch from behind my ear. I flung it aside, made myself truly alone.

“You are mistaken!” I said, speaking to the monster face-to-face, shouting to compensate for the loss of suit amplification. “Cut me down, and he will raise another in my place. You cannot destroy him, kinsman. You destroy only yourself. Your gods destroy you. They are using you. There is no godhood, no paradise awaiting you. Your road leads only to destruction.”

A light filled the heavens in that moment, less bright, more distant than the blast that had blinded Argo and his people, but still bright enough to veil for a moment Danu's twin suns. When the light faded, I found Dorayaica peering up, unblinking into that too-luminous sky.

"What is this?" it asked, speaking in its stilted way, face turning slowly to me, unfazed by that light brighter than the suns. "These weapons . . ."

Ranka enir cahuthun bas-koshun genarosh . . .

Epishtumshu . . .

Kerioch bas-qoqorosh . . .

". . . are the work of traitors . . ." Dorayaica said, speaking with human speech. "Utannash has armed you, as the Dreamer armed Elu . . . these are the weapons of the gods."

Hair streaming in the wind, I advanced a step. "Order your ships to stand down," I said. "Depart this place, or they will be destroyed."

Dorayaica might have been graven entirely of stone in that moment, peering up into the sky. Only its braided hair moved, and the hem of its midnight robes.

"*Rakanyi ejaayan*," it said at last.

They are nothing.

I longed to depress the trigger, to act. But I was not certain—even then—of whether or not the eidolon before me was truly present, or if it were only some trick, a shadow only, a projection cast by the Watchers across the stars.

And I was not certain where Ushara was, and while my life was a proper trade for the lives of Syriani Dorayaica and its fetal god . . . if I could trade myself for them and for Ushara, too . . .

But Cassandra was still surely present . . . and five of our ships.

"What you see is but the smallest fragment of my power," Dorayaica said. "My generals have sired armies on your dams. My—you call them *sorcerers*—have forged new legions of chimeric soldiers. We will burn your Eternal City, and the seats of your lords. I will feast upon the flesh of your Emperor, and feed his entrails to my slaves. And when I am done, and all your Empire is ashes, I will take your home, your *Earth* for my seat."

“You are not here,” I said.

Dorayaica looked round at me. “I am wherever my god goes,” it said. “We are in many places. As we speak, I am with my generals. We are preparing for the end.”

“The Emperor is not in the Eternal City,” I said.

“No matter,” Dorayaica said. “If I cannot have the *Uganatai*, I will have his seat. Your Eternal City is a symbol, like your Earth. They are the anchors that hold your people together. When they are gone, you will scatter and fall. Those who will not bow to me—to my god, who is me—will be destroyed. Those who kneel will be permitted their lives. Your worlds will be our pastures. Our man-folds. Your kind will serve. As slaves. As meat. As wombs. And Utannash will do *nothing*. Can do nothing. Because you will be dead, and if you are dead, *he* will never be.”

A strange peace had settled on me, despite the Prophet’s threats.

“You are mistaken,” I said, and took a step nearer the monster. Just one step. Away in the distance, a whine rose as the repulsors on yet another of my black ships upcycled and lifted the vessel into the sky.

“You are the one mistaken,” Dorayaica said, “Utannash—”

“About mankind!” I snapped, advancing another step. “You will burn our City, you say. We burned our home! It did not break us. And neither will you. You can burn the Eternal City to the ground, burn Earth a second time. We will paint our faces with their ashes! We—” I broke off as flashes of fire filled the sky. Columns of smoke. The wreckage of some ship falling from heaven. “You think us cattle. Prey. Do you know how it is we came to be, *kinsman*?” I spat the word like a curse. “Do you know what man *is*?”

Silence.

The Prophet’s black eyes narrowed. A bead of blood formed at the corner of one eye.

“We’re hunters,” I said. “And we will *never* stop hunting you. We learned to chase our prey to death. Across miles. Days. Light-years. Centuries. You will never break us—not all of us. Not so long as we draw breath.”

Dorayaica’s smile widened as I spoke.

“But you will all die,” it said. “When we have used you. When your last man’s back breaks in our service. When the last morsel of his flesh has fed our slaves. When the last of your women bursts birthing *our* children, and your last child is torn to pieces at our table . . . you will die.”

The trigger was in my hand.

“Which is it?” I said. “Will you conquer this universe? Or destroy it?”

Nishebbērshi.

The voice that answered me issued from Dorayaica’s lips, but filled the air like fog.

Nishebbērshi.

Weh mos gherou.

Enīheren set mawaf.

I heard Dorayaica’s voice following along, muttering, murmuring. “We will break it. Tear it. Wrench it from his grasp.”

Our eyes met, and I saw . . . I saw . . .

I saw a universe of darkness, absent any star. Worlds of night and cold. Worlds of fire, warmed and driven by machines. A cosmos made chaos, cut off from the light of god. I saw those spiral towers, the great buildings Ushara showed me in her eyes, but it was not man’s empire, not my empire of night, but the kingdom of the Cielcin. The universe was not unmade. It was cut adrift. No road was there, no path that led to that darkened city, to that crumbling sanctuary, that iron bassinet.

The Watchers would not create a new reality at all. They would poison ours, so that when the Absolute returned—however late, however delayed—there would be nothing left to save. What would it matter that good must triumph if there was so little of it left?

“Your death is the key,” Dorayaica said.

“If you believe that,” I said, “you should kill me now.”

The smile on Dorayaica’s face widened well beyond all human limit, bearing weeping gums, glass fangs. The lips cracked and splintered.

Veih.

Inu.

In-gi.

Lā.

Ou.

Appha.

Appha.

Appha.

No.

I heard a noise like bells, a cacophony of hideous sound.

The Dreamer was wide awake at last, its voice and Dorayaica's mingled, so that the Prophet became one half of that twinned voice.

A harmony.

Song.

Thunder filled the air, and looking up, I saw the pillars of fire that heralded the coming of Cielcin landing towers. I wanted to scream, to shout to the *smygels* and the ships parked on the ice. But there was no need. The squealing whine of engines answered the roar of fire, and the ships were taking off. All of them. All four that remained.

Go. I remember thinking. Go.

Dorayaica had said its piece. Miudanar would say less.

The bells! The bells!

A pain flared behind my eyes—my still too-human brain's response to the hyper-dimensional nature of the *thing* that faced me.

I could hear human voices. Shouts. Cursing.

Silent then a terrible light filled the sky, less bright, more distant than the blast that had blinded poor Argo, but bright enough to bury the suns—if only for a moment.

Demiurge had opened fire again, dark energy beam cleaving through another of the alien moons. Throwing a hand over my eyes, I hardly saw it. As my vision cleared, my eyes went to the ground at Dorayaica's feet.

To its shadow.

That shadow lengthened as it carved a channel in the light, like a great fish disturbing the surface of the waters.

Dorayaica's one remaining hand was raised, and its whole body was raised with it, so that the shadow took it up into the air—not far, not out of arm's reach.

One of my black ships exploded.

Far off, I saw it—a third sun shining low in the sky—and felt my heart sink.

“No!” The word was a roar. A sound without meaning. A sound of pure force.

My sword was in my hand, the blade a blazing beam of blue.

Before I had gone two steps, the second of the four vessels erupted, nearer at hand.

Cassandra! Cassandra!

It was Perfugium again.

I had let her come. I had sent her away.

And I had paid for it.

Amma, her precious voice resounded in my ears. *I have so much I want to tell you.*

Hadrian! Her last words, spoken via the comms in the Emperor’s bunker, the last time she ever said my name . . . *I—*

Darkness.

Goodbye.

Not Cassandra, I thought. *Never Cassandra. Never. Never. Never. Never.*

The third ship exploded, almost directly overhead, painting the landscape with red flame, transmuting the ice to carnelian. I rushed across the space between us, across time, making of myself a wave, a tide to batter the Pale King to death, but every way I turned, it was standing in my path, just as Ushara.

Rage is blindness, so the scholiasts say. But it was not rage that strengthened my limbs, nor fear, nor hatred.

It was love.

Love for the woman I had lost.

And the girl I was losing.

The last ship—low in the heavens—fell upon the ice not yet a mile off. The fire of it turned the world a bloody red.

“No!”

I leaped, making of my blade a spear aimed at the Prince of Princes’

heart.

The fingers of the White Hand rose, closed about the point of the blade, heedless that it was highmatter.

It did not matter.

Dorayaica held the weapon in its grip.

The worm had turned.

I was Irshan in that moment, shocked to stillness in the wreckage of my world.

“Fool.” Dorayaica settled to the ground, alighted as easily as child leaping from a step. It tossed my point aside, its long and many-braided hair floating in the burning air, white as snow. “You think you can defy us? You?”

I staggered back, wrongfooted by my leap and the sudden stop.

“Where is your god, kinsman?” Dorayaica asked, looking round. “Why does he not save you?”

I had no answer for the Prophet then, nor for the serpent coiled tight around its heart.

“Did I not tell you . . . when first you came to my home, that Utannash would abandon you?” it said. “Did I not warn you that when you cry out for salvation, he will not answer?”

I but stood there, utterly bereft, feeling as I had when I stood at the side of the cradle in Ragama’s temple. I might have smashed the egg in that moment, broken the circle of causation that had set me on my path. I might have lived another life. The Quiet might have chosen another champion—be it Lorian or some other.

It was for Cassandra alone I stayed my hand.

And Cassandra . . . Cassandra was . . .

The trigger was in my hand. The means to end it all. Let the Empire find a way to kill Ushara, let them hound the Cielcin armada to the uttermost edge of time. I would do what I had come to do—what I was born to do.

Am I a good man?

There was no answer.

I do not know why, but I had expected one. I listened for that distant

music, the celestial tones far off and sublime. There was nothing, nothing but the shadow looming over me. And so I hesitated.

Syriani Dorayaica took a step. Another.

Click. Scrape.

The White Hand vanished into its flowing sleeve, emerged with a sculpted rod of black metal fashioned in the image of bone. I knew it for what it was at once, marked the fittings, the triggers.

I had never seen it before, though I had heard tell of it—in the account Carax of Aramis gave before the Emperor. The Prophet had forged the thing itself, deep in the bowels of Dharan-Tun. Long had it been fascinated by the styles of mankind. Our culture. Our traditions. Our accomplishments. Its slaves had taken many of our swords in the fighting, and those weapons had found their way into the Prophet's hands. Those hands had disassembled them, reassembled them, fashioned components of their own.

The Prophet's blade sprang into existence. Not blue but almost white, flickering, unfocused, as the beam of a dying torch. The very air about it thrummed, and the sword itself gave off small shoots of lightning. It was badly tuned . . . but still its touch was Death.

Dorayaica did not leap across the space between us. Hardly it seemed to move at all. Rather it seemed the ice between us contracted, as though the very fabric of space were a rug pulled beneath my feet. Dorayaica slid toward me, its body still, unmoving, save for its sword arm.

It was all I could do to raise my own blade, was only thanks to my vision that I caught the blow in time. Dorayaica saw with the eyes of its god, and those eyes saw through time and across it at least so well as mine. No man in all the universe could have turned that dreadful blade. No man save I.

Afflicted as it was and hollowed out by the eldritch thing resident in its flesh, I had expected weakness, expected to find that inhuman hand and strength withered. But I was wrong. It took all my strength to turn that blow aside.

All my strength, and *both* my hands.

I let the trigger fall.

It was my salvation—though I knew it not. With both hands then I fended off the Prophet's press, and stepping to one side I swung my weapon wildly at the stone-crowned head.

The Shiomu-Elusha *vanished* entirely, appeared at once at my right hand. It had moved in an eyeblink, moved as I had moved in my battle with the soldiers of Nebet Hut. Only my vision saved me, and I *became* a Hadrian that turned the attack in time. The gleam of our blades flashed upon the ice as we slid across potentials. One moment, we occupied one position, the next moment another, each flickering between postures, cut and thrust, parry and riposte, feint and counter-feint. We were a series of still images, neither moving through space, but across time. One moment, we would stand with blades crossed between us, the next above our heads.

You cannot win.

Cadebayu wo.

The Prophet's words—mingled with the voice of its god—fell like thunder all about us. I backpedaled, retreating from the skein of tangled swords. Dorayaica did not press me. For an instant it seemed merely *Dorayaica*, and gestured at me with its blade. "Utannash has abandoned you. Admit it."

I did not dare speak.

"You are alone," Dorayaica said. "Your people are dead . . ."

Cassandra . . . I thought, and tears streamed from eyes wide and hard as glass, heedless of the cold, the stinging polar wind. *Cassandra* . . . My eyes found the wreckage of the nearest ship—a mile away. The antimatter tank had not ruptured when it fell.

Where had the transmitter gone? I blinked, cast about for it.

Cassandra . . .

Let it end, I thought. *Let it all end.*

It was too much. All of it . . . too much.

Valka. Corvo. Durand. Pallino. Elara. Siran. Ghen. Switch. Crim. Ilex. Udash. Cat. Gibson.

Valka . . . Valka . . . Valka.

Cassandra . . .

“She is dead, kinsman,” Dorayaica said, and Danu groaned beneath us. The sky roared as one of our own ships came down in fire.

She is dead . . .

Raka wemashu . . .

Ba-uvattaya . . .

Libbumka.

It knew. *They* knew.

Of course they knew. Miudanar saw all that passed in creation. The beast had only to turn its eye. It had seen my ships, seen *through* them, their every hall and chamber unrolled before its gaze.

“Let it end,” Dorayaica said, words echoing mine. “Let it go.”

This was why it had come. Not to kill me, but to *take*. To take everything *from* me. My last full measure of joy.

My fingers tightened on the hilt of my sword.

Where was the transmitter?

I searched for it, eyes downcast.

It must have fallen in the snow.

“Kill me, then,” I said, and it seemed some other man was speaking, a man old, tired, finished. The man Samek had destroyed, the old man of Jadd—waiting to die.

Dorayaica’s smile was the very mouth of hell. I could smell its fetid breath. Iron. Salt. Rotting meat. “Think you that I am a fool?” it asked. “I am not come to kill you. I see now that I cannot. Though I cut you down twelve thousand times, he will raise you up again to torment me. No. No.”

Veih.

Inu.

In-gi.

“You are *mine*,” Dorayaica said.

I looked up. Dorayaica was advancing on me, not walking but sliding over the ice, moving as starships move, displacing the very space it moved through. Then it towered over me, its blade bright, diffuse in its hand. Swaying, it slammed its foot against the ground, stamping with all its might. It wanted me to bow. To kneel. To surrender.

When I did not move, it stamped again. “*Junne!*” it commanded me. “Down!”

Still I did not move.

“You are my prisoner,” Dorayaica said, and brought its blade to my throat. My own yet hummed in my fist. “You will be my prisoner, all the days of your life. Only Utannash can save you, and Utannash is not here.”

My heart was ashes, even as my daughter was. My daughter, and my woman, and my life.

I had not enough light left in me.

No man does.

“*Junne!*” Dorayaica stamped again, footfall like the crash of a hammer on stone.

A hand—cold and hard as marble—settled on my shoulder. I froze, not daring to turn, as a voice cold and terrible as sunset on a night of storm sounded in my soul.

Torzu!

it said.

Torzu farzam! Biahu farzam!

Rise up, it whispered. *Stand up*.

A shadow had fallen on the sun, and looking up, I saw her, standing high above Dorayaica in the clear air, between me and Danu’s unsetting sun: a woman’s shape, her curving figure draped in a black veil that hid all but her blazing eyes.

Turning my head, I saw more of her—five more—her image reflected about spacetime, forming a circle about us.

Those horrid bells rang in my ears, each peal a syllable of her hateful name.

Ushara! Ushara!

She had come for me, come to offer me what she had offered me on Sabratha: Herself. I had not wanted her then, wanted her less now. But I would not live by any other road, not unless Ragama or the Absolute himself appeared and delivered me. And Syriani was right—though I cried out in my heart for salvation—my god was *Quiet*.

I was a dead man, ten thousand times over.

Not like this, I remember thinking, and squeezed the hilt of my sword until the bones ached. *Not like this*.

When had I gone to my knees? I could not remember.

Syriani Dorayaica was still standing over me, sword flickering in its hand, its long and braided hair streaming in the wind. The fires had spread from the crashed ship to the water refinery, cinders carried by the breeze. The dirigible was burning.

Time seemed to have ceased.

Am etoch ge tel.

You need not die . . .

It was Ushara's voice, rich and cold, that filled me then. She stood upon the firmament, high above the broken crown on Dorayaica's head. The veil that covered her head to toe somehow concealed nothing, and I saw her red-rimmed eyes. No matter where I looked, I saw them . . . I saw . . .

I saw the darkened universe, the last stars run down to embers. I beheld entire worlds constructed round those embers, horrific cages of metal and stone built to house the still-enduring sons of men. I saw an endless city, like the city of Llesu, and yet unlike it. There rose another of the great spiraling towers, another Babylonian construction of pillars and of curling terraces. Atop it gathered a vast throng. Men and women, all of them kneeling, pressing their faces to the stone at the sight of the figure that emerged.

Tall was he, as any king of man, raven-haired, pale complected, forever young, strong, terrible to behold. About him streaming banners hung, black as his hair, and when he raised his hand and the drumbeat died, the people cried aloud. "Hadrian King! Hadrian King! Hadrian King!"

It was myself, and the Empress standing naked at my side was Ushara, her blazing eyes upon me where I watched as the lords of all that lightless realm came and kissed my booted feet.

Oi noan canse . . .

she said, her voice like strong wine.

This might be.

Oi noan faphen . . .

This shall be.

Tribute they laid before me. Gold and gems, spices, furs, fabrics of all description. Weapons and artifacts, scrolls and sacred texts from all across the universe. Women rent their gowns to offer what lay beneath and were led by iron soldiers through the black gates of the palace to one side, never to return.

Then came one at the end, a boy with hair white as bone. He knelt and offered the king something on a velvet pillow. The king rose from his throne, his odalisques parting about his feet like the waters, and lifted the thing from the boy's cushion.

It was a horned skull, the bone turned half to crystal, translucent as salt. Time had worn the horns to nothing.

It was the head of Dorayaica, relic of an age so vanished from human memory that its meaning was lost to all but the black king and his deathless bride. And I lifted the skull by its horns and kissed it, and kissing it cast it aside, where it shattered into countless shards. Lords and kings like beggars rushed to take the shattered bits of bone for their own.

Glory . . .

. . . or . . .

. . . decay.

And at once, it was Dorayaica who stood before the throne, and the skull that shattered at its feet wore a crown of living gold.

Her offer was plain. She would back me, would have me take Dorayaica's place. Man would live, would take up the Cielcin mantle, the mantle of the Enar, of the Vaiartu who were dead, and rule unto the uttermost end of time. And I would live forever, and so escape the judgement of the One. She had no love for Miudanar, no kinship with him.

I had but to take her hand, accept her troth, and she would deliver me from that place, from my suffering. Together, we would slay Dorayaica and its demon-god, and rule eternal. The Cielcin would all be washed away. With *Demiurge*, I would wrest the flagging Empire for my own, and take Selene to wife. Our marriage would win me the love and loyalty of the great

houses, but it would be a sham. Ushara would be my bride, and the mother of my children.

I could see her hand extended in the corner of my vision, as though she stood just out of sight.

Arpa ozian ol . . .

. . . od tol im nodan amsa.

Take my hand, and all this shall be yours.

All this passed in the space of time required for Dorayaica to stamp its foot a third and final time.

“*Junne!*” it roared, lips cracking as it leered, so certain of its victory.

I blinked up at it, at Ushara’s hand—apparently unseen—where it entered my periphery at my left. I had but to seize it, choose her, and destroy Dorayaica. But I knew her promises were hollow, knew her guarantees were false. Would she not do to me what Miudanar had done to the Prophet? Would I not die by inches, and aeons before her promises came to pass?

There is another way. The voice that whispered in me then could have been anyone. My hand tightened on the hilt of my sword. *Let it end . . .*

I could slay myself. Surely I would rise again, saved as I had been twice saved by the one above all. I looked at Ushara. At Dorayaica.

Where was the Quiet?

Where was my god?

I could not hear him; the music of the Watchers—the clangor of despair—sounded too loudly in my ears.

Let it end. Let it all end.

I had only to turn my wrist.

There would be nothing. No pain. No . . . resistance.

I would escape them both, escape Danu entirely.

But something stayed my hand.

I cannot now say what it was, why it was I endured. Perhaps I feared to test the Quiet’s faith in me, to abuse his kindness.

Where is your god, kinsman?

Perhaps it was only fear.

“Junne!”

Down!

Down!

Down!

The Prophet’s words had joined with those of its god, rang like bells in the deep places of my mind, mingled with the words of Ushara, both of them—all three—shouting, shouting, shouting . . . their noise in concert drowning out all other music.

Give yourself to me!

Atrah amiran de ol!

Give up.

Give in!

Arpa ozian ol!

Torzu

farsa!

Ju

nne!

Rise!

Stand!

Junne!

Biah

farsa!

Junne!

Kneel or die!

Gasvva ija wemma!

Kimis ū tamât.

Ol zir amsa!

. . . would be yours!

Muqut ana libbi da’ummim

sha ihakkûka.

Atrah amiran de ol!

. . . de ol!

Fall into the darkness that awaits you!

. . . de ol!

. . . to me!

A single word tore from my throat, a cry such as I had not let fly since that black day on Perfugium, and—still crying—I rose, blade striking at Ushara’s hand, striking across time to ensure she could not escape me. No human hand, no human blade could touch that fleshless flesh. No mere man could—in ten thousand lifetimes, wound that luminous form. But mine did.

My sword bit the unholy flesh that was no flesh at all, and at once she vanished, black figure gone.

I'd had my chance.

She had left me to die, left me at the mercy of Miudanar.

My ragged cry still echoed in my ears.

Cassandra!

I would not die, would not cease . . . not until she was avenged.

Dorayaica's blade descended, falling like the White Sword. I seized the Prophet by the wrist with my free hand. It took all my vision, all my will to hold that inhuman hand at bay. Our eyes met. In those twin black pools I saw my enemy, *both my enemies*. I saw Syriani Dorayaica, Pale King of the Cielcin, Prophet of that unholy race—scholar, sovereign, Scourge of Earth.

And I saw the Watcher, the Dreamer, the half-dead god-thing, patron of the Cielcin, the many-handed serpent that had called to Elu across the stars and made it great. I saw its hatred, its malice—saw too its pain.

What it saw in me made it blink.

In that moment, I slammed the crown of my head into the Prophet's looming face. Felt that face shatter, saw the bone and crystalline flesh fall like glass from a broken window.

The *thing* that stared out at me from inside Dorayaica's broken skull was . . . I cannot describe it. It was horror and beauty at once.

Then it vanished, and Dorayaica vanished with it. Turning my eye, I watched them go with other vision, sliding right across time.

Together then they dove at me, crashing across spacetime as a swimmer crashes beneath the waves. Ten thousand swords were raised against me, each held in one of the Watcher's countless limbs, each limb Syriani's own White Hand. Ten thousand times I answered it, parried every blow, turned every strike . . .

. . . every strike but one.

I saw its blade dip, a limping of the wrist. A dropping of the point.

Slip.

I might have died then.

Died . . . but for the sword that intervened—blue as the lost skies of

Earth, bright as sunfire—and struck the White Hand from its wrist. The flickering blade forged by the Prince of the Princes of the Pale faltered and fell from nerveless fingers. Silver ichor fell smoking to the ice, and the Prophet of the Cielcin recoiled, three eyes glaring at me out of its shattered face.

Then a word—the last word I thought again ever to hear—sounded in my ear, its music sweeter, stronger than the discord of the Watchers.

“Abba?” She was standing just beside me, her own helmet torn off.

I was going mad. It was the only explanation.

“Are you all right?” Her eyes were fixed on Dorayaica, who had fallen back several paces.

She had taken off the White Hand.

“You were dead,” I said. “The ships, I . . . I saw you die.”

Cassandra looked at me, confusion and concern on her face. “The ship is waiting for us!”

“What?”

I looked round. The red light, the fires, the wreckage of the ship on the ice . . .

. . . all vanished.

A trick? I returned my attention to the monster stood before us. Dorayaica was bent over the stump of its hand, a strange, croaking sound emanating from its chest.

“How can it be here?” Cassandra asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. Had it all been some illusion? A bending of the light, of the impulses in my mind?

Why?

Perhaps Miudanar yet lacked the strength, or perhaps . . . perhaps the Quiet would not have saved me, if I took my own life in desperation and despair.

“We have to go,” I said.

“Abba!”

“Go!” I spurred her on ahead of me, back toward the village. “Get Holden on the comms, tell him to bring the ship around.”

“But . . . Abba . . . ?” Her eyes were yet on Dorayaica, who had fallen to its knees, was cradling the stump of its hand.

The transmitter was lost, buried in the blanketing snow, and while I might have found it again, I could not use it, because to use it then would have been to kill *her* too—and that I could not do, could never do. Without it, without *Voidmaker* lying in wait in the black above, I could not be guaranteed of the Watcher’s ending.

And Ushara was gone—had been there only a moment.

Weak though the creature in Dorayaica’s flesh yet was, it had been brought forth in the time beyond time, in the darkness before all light, the world beyond all worlds that was *before*. The author of all things had written it into being, crafted it to shepherd the stars, or to tend the very weave of creation.

We were only human, the children of apes, of animals, uplifted only by the will of him as made us, armed with nothing but our swords.

“Run!”

I followed her, sprinting over the ice. The sky was full of fire. Almighty columns of smoke towered over us, racing across the heavens as Lin’s ships and the ships of the enemy fell to earth. Danu shuddered, a titanic beast breathing its last breaths.

Dorayaica yet lived. Miudanar yet lived. Ushara yet lived.

That was what mattered. The *only* thing that mattered.

We had failed.

Away ahead of us, the black ships were rising, each a graceful spearhead decorated in dark reliefs. One stayed low, swinging round on its repulsors, its ramp extended. I could make out the shapes of men upon it, white armored and red.

Nābut!

Kianna!

Run!

You cannot run!

Nābutam ul telê.

Kianeuyu mnu!

Lightning ran across the sky, struck the earth, but did not fade.

I turned, just in time to see the black shape speeding after us, low to the ground. Too low.

I brought my sword around to meet it, made to conjure the blade. Too late.

“Abba!”

The beast collided with me, and I was hurled to the ice and snow. On me the shadow fell, tall, terrible, crowned with bone. I heard the sound of a weapon kindling, and Cassandra leaped over me—utterly unafraid. But her blade found nothing. Dorayaica vanished, blinked out of existence. The empty sleeve of Cassandra’s *mandyas* streamed like a battle standard; her short dark hair was like a halo of black fire where she stood between me and my enemy.

It was the last place I wanted her to be.

Cold laughter—more like the laughter of men than of Cielcin—filled the frozen air.

“Still you are defiant!” Dorayaica’s voice was gay, darkly amused. “Still you resist! Still! See you not their power? Know you not that it is useless? You are *yukajjimm*! Worms! Your race is ended! *I* will end it! And you! And *him*! I will tear from Utannash his throne, and take it for my own!”

The shadow had returned, resolved, become Dorayaica once again.

A light—utterly without color, so white it seemed somehow gray—shone through the cracked and crumbling orbital below one sable eye. Dorayaica lifted the stump of its arm, as if to touch its face with the absent fingers. The same light shone from its severed wrist. Then *something* slithered out, a silver serpent, like one of the *nahute*, but smaller, thinner, no wider than a finger.

A finger . . .

Another.

Another.

A *hand* emerged from the severed wrist, prying its way out of Dorayaica’s flesh like some parasitic fish from the gills of its host. Bright white it was and luminous as the flesh of Ushara herself, paler even than the

deathly hide of the Cielcin lord. Six-fingered it was, but it was no Cielcin hand. It had no claws, no extra phalanges.

Miudanar's hand.

"See you that my god is true?" Dorayaica asked, extending the hand. "See how he stoops to aid me in this—my hour?" The Prophet slid toward us, flowing over ice and snow. As it did, I caught movement out one corner of my vision, and turned, expecting to see Ushara returned, standing in the air above us. Instead, there was another Dorayaica. And another, and another. As one, they reached into a fold of the tattered toga they wore, and drew out the last thing I expected.

Her craft was honest and clean: the hilt wrapped in leather so red it was almost black, her pommel and fittings of plated silver, with a single finger loop in her rain guard near the mouth whence her blade would spring.

It was a sword such as the Emperor himself might wield without shame. The Emperor . . . or the Crown Prince of Jadd . . .

. . . or the Halfmortal.

It was *my* blade, the very weapon Kaim-Olorin had given me at the very start of my quest.

Syriani Dorayaica had taken it from me when I was its prisoner. And though I had plucked its twin from another time to free myself, the original—the true blade—had remained in the Prophet's possession all the years since. It had kept it, worn it on its own person, a trophy and a talisman both.

I had thought never to see it again.

"Cassandra," I said. "Get to the ship."

I reached up, undoing the fibula that pinned my cloak in place.

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"You can't fight it," I said.

"I'm not leaving you."

Her sword flashed in her hand. I kindled my own. Shoulder to shoulder we stood.

Dorayaica's smile spread across the remaining half of its face. Then it was on us, not passing through the space between. It was all I could do to raise my sword in time, to parry before Dorayaica vanished. It appeared

again, at a distance this time. Vanished. Appeared at Cassandra's right. It was all the girl could do to duck, but she did it. My old blade clove the air where an instant before her head had been. She struck back, but Syriani vanished, skittering back across the space beyond space. Then it redoubled its efforts, lunged in a way that caused its blade to thrust at her from left and right at once.

Cassandra parried them both, treating the twinned attack as two attackers. She retreated, apparently undaunted. I leaped past her, stabbing at Dorayaica's eyes. The demon king turned my blade with its own, light shining through its broken face. Cassandra swung at it, and the whole thing *blinked*, snapping from one posture to the next to catch her blade.

Your child.

A child . . .

Dorayaica's voice filled the air like smoke, issuing not from its lips, but from everywhere at once.

Think you still you have a future?

Once more, the Prophet-King vanished, appeared before Cassandra, blade falling like the blade of a guillotine. I saw her die ten thousand ways, chased by the Prophet across the vasty breadth of time, blocking blow after blow.

She could not fight the Prophet and its god.

No man could, save myself alone.

She would die if this continued, die for true and not in some waking nightmare of the Watcher's making.

Bang!

A shot broke the air, struck the ice not five paces to my right. I turned, sparing a glance to find its source.

Our ship was drawing near, hovering low over the ice. I could feel the static hum of its repulsors—a thrumming in my chest, it rattled my very teeth. There were men on the ramp—Holden's men—with guns aimed at the Prophet. I saw the green point of a targeting laser strafe the black-robed chest, heard another shot.

Dorayaica only smiled. The bullet missed.

Then a beam of blue-white light erupted from the lance of one man on the ramp, a sustained, focused burn. That beam passed through the Prophet's chest, but when it burned the snow, it was in countless diffuse lines.

"Think you . . . that you can resist?" The words issued from the Prophet's cracked and broken lips.

Dorayaica seemed to grow as it leered up at our approaching ship, until the Prophet stood half again as high as any man—a giant, an ogre crawled off the pages of some monstrous storybook.

"Think you that you can escape?"

The Irchtani were coming. Four of them, falling like arrows from the war-torn sky. Wings beat about my head, and I felt talons close over my shoulders, felt my feet half leave the ground. My knees hit the ice an instant later, and the birdman who had seized me fell in pieces.

I had to make a choice.

"Take her!" I roared. "Fall back to Gododdin! Tell the Emperor we failed!"

Gododdin.

Dorayaica could not have failed to hear, and hearing would uproot its plan entire. Gododdin was far nearer than Forum, or Avalon, or Earth—and it was on the way. It would send its legions to Gododdin, in an effort to break the back of all mankind before it conquered her. It would hurl everything it had at the Emperor.

I *knew* Dorayaica, knew it could not refuse, for canny as it was and cunning, it was still Cielcin, and a fighter to its bones.

"Abba!"

I saw Cassandra wrenched skyward, her Irchtani escort lifting her.

"Cassandra!" I shouted after her. "I'm sorry!"

If I did not intervene, did not stop Dorayaica, I knew the Prophet would tear her from the sky. So I did what any father would. I hurled myself back into the fray, knowing in that moment that I might never see her again. That thought no longer burned me—who had so recently thought her dead.

I love you.

I lunged at Dorayaica, blade crossing uncounted potentials to skewer the Pale King's heart. But the Prophet saw me coming, saw the countless lines of potential collapsing like paper houses, and twisted out the way. Blades clashed—both mine—rang in the polar wind, louder than the clarion bells that heralded the presence of that unclean god. With every blow, every cut, I stretched my vision farther than ever I had before.

Then something happened. Something I fear I cannot explain.

All the world seemed to fall away, to smear and flatten beneath our feet, so that we trod upon the infinite plane of our world. All of Danu—all creation—became then a carpet beneath our feet. We had moved beyond the prismatic crashing of time, moved above the ordinary world of four-dimensional spacetime. Desperation had pushed me further—higher—than ever I had been pushed before . . . into the space beyond space, the hyperspatial reality to which our whole universe seems small.

Still we fought on, the universe sloshing about our feet. I could feel the ice of Danu's polar day cracking beneath my feet, feel the planet trembling, hear the whine of engines, the beating of enormous wings. But at the same time . . . above and behind it all, I heard the music.

The song. The noise like the noise of bells . . . and the silence, deep and pure and beautiful.

Then, as though we battled through the streets of some high-towered city, we happened on a place where the light fell just so, where the angles aligned and I saw the path run straight.

I saw the road Dorayaica had taken to reach us, the road it had taken over space and time's swirling waters to Danu from Dharan-Tun.

I struck the beast a savage blow. Highmatter met the flesh-turned-stone, bounced off as though it were common steel. Syriani Dorayaica staggered back. On I flared, step by careful step, pursuing it. I slashed at it again, hammering the stone arm. I felt the ice groan beneath my feet—felt something else.

Cold stone.

Dorayaica fell to one knee, raised its sword—my sword—to shield its horned head.

I froze.

We were together in the throne room of the Dhar-Iagon, beneath the white rock dome where the Prophet sat alone and conversed with its gods.

We were on Dharan-Tun.

I had crossed light-years to get there, but I had made the journey on my own two feet.

In that moment, I saw myself from without, a figure armored in black, his long hair in curtains about his face, his sword a blazing beam of sunfire in one gauntleted fist. But that was only the accident of the man. I saw the truth of him, his substance: a radiance bright as any sun, a fountain such as those that stream new matter into the cosmos we longed to unmake.

And I understood. The One had no need to save this man, this *worm*.

He had *sent* him, invested him with powers greater than any *thing* of so mean an estate should possess. The *thing* had taken the straight path, the narrow way beyond time, moved as *we* moved. He saw as we saw.

He shook his head—I shook my head. “Stay out of my mind, monster.”

I felt the Watcher’s fingers slacken from around my heart. Too late.

I had felt its fear.

The Watcher was afraid.

The realization sent a thrill of terror through me. Fear of the Quiet—that anything could frighten a thing as terrible as the monster in Dorayaica’s heart. Fear of myself. But I could not kill it, not with a sword. I did not have to. I had done what I came to do. I had driven the Prophet and its god from Danu. I had saved Cassandra, and set the pieces for the endgame.

There was nothing left to do.

“You see?” I asked. “It’s afraid, Dorayaica, afraid. Your god is afraid.”

A wretched, croaking sound emanated from the body of the possessed creature kneeling at my feet. Did I dare strike it? It punched the black stone floor with its luminous hand, shoulders shaking.

It was laughing.

Rakayu sajarate . . .

Hoxmarh ti ge.

It is not fear . . .

I retreated, cowed by the sound of that voice. It was like nothing human: part Cielcin, part monster from beyond the circles of time.

The next words, when they came, issued from Dorayaica's lips, thin and breathy. "It is hatred."

Then it moved, blurring, stretching across all reality, so that it seemed a shadow flowing over the pale stone walls of that unholyest of holies.

I retreated, blade flashing as the flowing beast rushed toward me across every avenue of time. Attack after attack after attack after attack, hammering, hammering, hammering.

That was when I understood. It had been toying with me before, *they* had been toying with me. Weak from its long millennia of solitude and suffering Miudanar might have been, but it was pure force, pure will, pure malice—without true form or substance.

I was a *worm*.

Still, I held, turned back blow after blow. But I knew it was the end. I could no more best the Watcher and its dying host than a germ might unmake a mountain. The Watcher was—quite literally—a force of nature, a god.

I was—I am—only human.

I hardly saw the blow that took me, hardly felt the blade until the rain guard punched my gut. Some peripheral part of my power, I think, diverted the blade an angstrom, so that the blow that should have felled me a third and mayhap final time but pierced my side. I caught my would-be destroyer's hand on reflex, felt the luminous flesh like living crystal beneath my fingers.

Dorayaica's face was inches from my own. I met its eyes—all three of them, black and black and red-rimmed fire. It was the black that truly frightened me. It had been easy to think of the Prophet as a pawn, a victim in this game of gods and monsters, a proxy in that war across all space and time. I had wanted to save it, to redeem it and all its kind. But as I looked into the hollows of its eyes, I saw something far worse than the pure malice of the Watcher.

I saw nothing at all.

That gaze—those eyes—were blank and pitiless as the space between the suns.

Dorayaica *wanted* this, had wanted this all the sunless days of its life.

It was no victim, no pawn.

It wanted what its god wanted.

It wanted Death.

Its gleaming fingers released the hilt buried in my side. I squeezed the weapon—my weapon—tight as the blade unkindled.

Iagga ti-caihanar ba-okarin . . .

Dorayaica said.

Go to your god.

Dababshum nillak.

Marerra o-tajun oyumn yelneto ji.

Tell him we are coming.

Hot blood was sheeting down my side, smoking in the freezing air. I could feel the underlayment of my suit contracting, squeezing to staunch the flow. But Dorayaica's thrust had pierced my liver, my bowels. I would die, and slowly. Painfully. Wretchedly. I stumbled, retreated half a step.

That gleaming hand reached out to seize me by the throat.

I took another step, felt snow beneath my feet, saw drops of red staining the white.

The world shook, the sky filled once more with fire.

I was on Danu again, a thousand light-years away.

I sank to my knees, clutching my unkindled blades in either hand, pressed the left fist to my side.

My ship was waiting for me, and there, upon its ramp, surrounded by men and by Irchtani . . . was my daughter.

Alive.

CHAPTER 33

THE ENERGUMENS

ONCE, WHILE I LANGUISHED in the steam tunnels below Vedatharad, I had conjured and closed a wound in my side. How I had done this was a mystery to me. I had never replicated the feat, never managed to heal myself again . . . but neither had I walked in that higher realm before, nor crossed light-years at a step.

On these things I ruminated, seated in the back of the black shuttle, beneath a frieze depicting the Seduction, in which one of the Kings of Earth gave his body—and his heart—to a woman of metal and light. A daughter of Columbia.

A daimon.

One of Holden's soldiers—a woman bald as all legionnaires are bald—crouched before me, administering the beta treatment to staunch the flow of blood.

"You must get to the surgeon, lord," she said. "Beta can't fix this."

"Just stop the bleeding, woman," I said, and clenched my fist about the hilt of my sword.

The ship shook beneath us, and the Danuans cried out in fear.

"We're taking fire," said one of the soldiers.

I could see the whites of every Danuan eye, sense their terror. Most of them surely had never been aboard a ship before, much less a ship of the Extrasolarians, of the black kingdom of Vorgossos. Nor had any of them been in battle.

We would not be in battle long. We had but to clear the atmosphere, after which the ship's daimon would effect a short-range jump to warp and so return us to *Demiurge*. But the guns of the Cielcin fleet in orbit were on us, and their lightercraft were in pursuit.

Restoring my ivory-handled blade to its hasp at my right hip, holding the sword Olorin had given me in my left hand, I rose, groaning.

“My lord, you must rest!” The medtech laid hands on me, tried to force me to sit once more.

“Ship!” I said. “Time to warp?”

“*Report,*” the vessel’s coolly feminine voice answered. “*Time to superluminal translation two minutes, fifty-four seconds.*” As the creature spoke, my eyes alighted on the relief image of the Seduction once again.

There stand I, I thought, eying the besotted king of man. Had I compromised too much? Allowed too much to gain this victory? And would it be a victory?

I pressed my fist to my wounded flank, winced as I took my first pair of halting steps.

“Tell these people to sit down,” I said, gesturing to the horde of Danuan refugees. “On the floor if they have to. Our suppression fields are strong, but the jump can still surprise us!” The legionnaires took up my orders, shouting for the people to get down. I’d pushed through a knot of them by then—on my way to the bridge—and stopped in the arched portal. Not looking back, I raised my voice, said, “The ship will shake as it jumps past light-speed! I don’t want any of you hurt.”

There were more refugees in the hall further in, families seated against the walls. Wide eyes watched as I limped past, swaying. A girl with freckles all across her face stared with eyes round as kaspums. I saw a boy so like Switch staring up at the graven images on the opposite wall, hugging his knees. Beside him, a woman with dark hair was seated, glaring at me with dark eyes, her face half concealed by a filter mask.

I had thought them all dead.

Why had Miudanar not simply killed them? Why had the Watcher played its ugly trick?

The thought sat in me like an ulcer.

Holden had put guards on the bridge. The ship’s daimon piloted the vessel, and that daimon could be accessed anywhere on board. But it was not the daimon I wanted to see.

“Abba!” Cassandra turned as I entered, Holden and Ramanathanu beside her. “You’re all right?”

“I’ll live,” I said. I had lost a good measure of blood. I needed surgery, and soon. “We’re taking fire?”

It was the ship that answered. “*Report,*” it said. “*Hostile presence detected in low orbit over the planet. They are attempting to destroy this vessel.*”

Cassandra arched her eyebrows.

“Can we survive?”

“*Analysis,*” came the inhuman reply. “*This system places the probability of its survival at seventy-three point seven percent, with an estimated accuracy rating of ninety-nine point three percent probability of reality.*”

Cassandra’s eyes grew—if anything—even larger. “Like talking to Neema . . .”

“What of the other ships?” asked Holden. Ghoshal’s centurion had removed his helmet, ran a hand over his gleaming scalp.

“*Report,*” the daimon answered him. “*Transports C-0012 and C-0015 are away. Transport C-0009 time to translation: eleven seconds.*”

Two of our ships were already clear.

I clenched my jaw, counted the moments.

“*Transport C-0009 is away.*”

I felt a tangible wave of relief wash over me, even as the vessel rocked beneath us, the result of some direct hit. Three were away. Four remained. Cassandra’s hand settled on my shoulder and I started. I have not forgotten the look on her face, the eyes like jeweled glass, shining, hollow. I must have looked like death.

I drew her close, pressed her ear to mine, one hand on the back of her head. Neither of us spoke, even as another blast shook the nameless vessel. I had visions of firebombs falling from the Cielcin fleet a thousand miles above our heads.

“Shields are holding,” Holden said.

“*Report: One minute, fifty-one seconds to translation.*”

That was when Ramanathanu raised its voice, pushing past Holden and

one of the other soldiers to stand by the forward windows. “*Retattaa!*”

I had felt it before the Cielcin spoke. Tasted it. As a static charge upon the air. As iron on my tongue.

“Abba?”

I ran to the window in time to see the lightning coming, emerging not from any cloud, but from the space between spaces, as from the clear air. For a moment, I thought I saw one huge, lidless eye peering in at me from outside, but there was no recognition in it. It had not seen me.

She had not seen me. Not yet.

Then there was light.

Light.

Brighter than the sun it was, but brief as summer snow. The ship’s windows cut the glare, spared me and all of us poor Argo’s fate.

“Alert: Transport C-0011 destroyed.”

Ushara had come, bringing fire and sword. She had breached the shuttle’s fuel containment, and *Demiurge*’s shuttles were whole ships, warp-capable. Warp capability meant antimatter. Meant annihilation.

It was a miracle our shields endured.

“Initiate the jump!” I said.

“Response: It is not advisable to instigate translation inside a planet’s atmosphere. Probability of damage to surrounding environs: high. Proposal: wait.”

I shouted over the machine’s falsely female voice. “The planet is lost already, daimon! Go!”

“Report: one minute, seventeen seconds to translation.”

“Go, damn you!”

“Complying.”

The black ship hummed like a harp-string as its engines screamed to life. Faster, faster, faster. Abruptly I recalled my vision out the forward viewport of *Ascalon* as Valka and I escaped the wreck of *Tamerlane*, the way the twin towers of the gates of Akterumu had blurred and run, twisting like the images in a boy’s kaleidoscope as our ship built itself a caul of twisted space. The ice, the world, the very sky dissolved in a brilliant flash of

indigo. Had one of the Danuan water farmers remained on the surface, they would have seen a brief distortion, a flicker as of ball lightning . . . and then the shockwave would have hauled the poor bastard a dozen feet or more into the sky.

“*Translation complete.*”

The instant the machine finished this pronouncement, the blue glow of warp ended.

We had arrived, jumped two light-hours in the space of perhaps half a dozen heartbeats.

We were soaring just above the towers and cathedral spires of *Demiurge*, so that for a moment it seemed that I had returned across the countless aeons to the black city of Llesu.

“What the hell was that thing?” asked Holden. He had not been at Phanamhara, had been in the sky, in the battle between the Sabratha Defense Force and Muzugara’s worldship.

“That was . . . the one from Sabratha, wasn’t it?” Cassandra asked.

Ramanthanu shifted behind me. “*Caihanaru . . .*”

The god.

“Yes,” I said, addressing Cassandra. I pressed a hand to my side, wincing, “That, soldier, was a god.”

“What?” A nervous laugh escaped the other man. “The thing from Sabratha? The one your people are always on about?”

“She’s looking for me,” I said. “That jump to warp will have confused her, but we have to get on board *Demiurge*. The ship is designed to confound their sight.”

“What?” Holden’s eyes narrowed, incredulous.

I ignored him. “We can’t stay here.”

Cassandra’s shoulders hunched, and she half turned away. “We failed.”

“No,” I said, “not yet. Ship!”

A chime sounded to indicate the iron beast was listening.

“Get me the bridge.”

A moment later, Orphan’s twin faces appeared, ghostlike, above the center of the floor, before the empty throne. “Master! Master!”

“What of the plan?”

“The plan’s changed,” I said. “What is the status of the fleet?”

“Holding,” said the basso.

The castrato spoke over its compatriot, “But they cannot hold for long.”

“Nor can the planet long endure,” said the other.

“We have refugees,” I said. “How many of us won free?”

Orphan was a moment answering. “Five.”

Ushara had destroyed two. We had lost perhaps a hundred men—Ghoshal’s men, and my Irchtani—perhaps a thousand refugees. Fully a third of those we’d risked all to save.

Two thousand survivors.

The loss of any *one* of Bassander Lin’s ships would cost us far more in terms of human blood and death. Almost I felt the Tavrosi had the proper notion, crewing their ships as sparsely as they did. How foolish my plan seemed in that moment—how right Cassandra was. We *had* failed, and failed spectacularly. Never mind that the test of the *Darklight* weapons was an utter success, never mind the destruction of several of the enemy’s worldships, never mind that Cassandra lived, or that I had faced the Prophet of the Cielcin and its gods and lived to tell of it.

I had not slain them. Not one.

Speaking the name of Gododdin—which had seemed wisdom to me when I faced what I thought was certain death—seemed foolishness in the dark of the bridge. Dorayaica was gone, returned across the light-years to its lightless palace. Before long, it would appear before its generals, its slaves, and order them to attack the Imperial stronghold.

“Orphan,” I said, “can we destroy the remaining worldships?”

“We rely upon the fleet to pick our targets,” the pilot answered, pale eyes flashing beneath pale hair. “We cannot track the enemy at our current distance.”

I took this in, wincing as I renewed pressure on my side. It was impossible to track and target the enemy at two light-hours’ distance. When we had first ambushed the fleet, the ships were all in stable orbits. Targeting them was a matter of mere mathematics. The worldships had moved to

higher orbits, or broken orbit entirely, hoping to outmaneuver Lin and Kull's fleets and escape whatever it was attacking their ships.

"Have they spotted us?" I asked.

"Yes," said Orphan.

"Yes." The pale-haired one turned its head away, electrodes trailing from its skull like the delicate chains of some veiled diadem. It blinked. "They have fired on us. Dispatched their little ships. We will be gone before they can reach us."

"I want you to take the ship in," I said, peering through Orphan's phantom at the black towers outside. We were nearly to the docking bay. Tall buttresses passed overhead, connecting to outriggers that paralleled the main body of the daimon-haunted vessel. "We must retrieve Lin and Kull. As soon as we're aboard, jump to warp. If we cannot destroy Dorayaica or the Watchers, we will destroy as many of them as we can." We had reached the mouth of the docking bay. Black doors opened beneath us, and a pale light streamed out. I could hear the hiss of attitude jets, the hum of repulsors, and the towers of *Demiurge* rolled about our heads, so that the gate—which had been below us—stood now at our right hand.

"Abba?"

I seized Cassandra's wrist, squeezed until she yelped and tugged her hand away.

"What is it?" she asked.

If I *had* seen what I had seen . . .

"Ushara."

She had vanished.

She had been standing at right angles to us, her unshod feet upon the rim of the gate, not twenty paces from where we stood: a figure clad in gauzy night, her eyes like dying stars.

"What? Where?"

"She is here," I said. "Prepare for warp."

The whole vessel shook around us as docking clamps deployed.

"What of the planet?" Orphan asked, recalling Edouard's objections.

"The planet is lost," I said. We had saved all we could. "If we cannot

have Dorayaica, or the Watchers, we will settle for sending them a message.” I paused, studying the look of vague terror on my daughter’s face. I smiled, hoping to reassure her. I did not want the Danuans to die, but if we could strike *this* blow at least against the enemy of man, it would be a start, and enough to galvanize the rest of the Cielcin fleet to sail against Gododdin.

“So shall it be,” said the centimanus, deep voice speaking.

Its counterpart asked, “What of yourself?”

“We’re coming to you,” I said. “End transmission.”

“Complying.”

I turned to Holden. “Centurion,” I said. “I want you to stay here and pacify the Danuans. Have your men go for food. That ought to ease them, I —”

A shot reverberated through the hull, loud as thunder. Cassandra flinched, hand flying to her sword and shield-belt, eyes growing wide. Another shot. A scream.

“What’s going on?” Holden moved to the door.

The noise of shouting intensified, floated up the hall without. I could hear our guards—their armor clattering—just outside the door. “Get back! Back!”

More shots sounded then, just outside the door.

The door opened, and I saw one of our door guards framed in the opening, his lance lowered. His quarry hove into view, a man with tangled hair clad in the gray singlesuit of a working man, the coiled tubes of heating elements embedded beneath its stained outer layer.

It was one of the refugees.

The man wielded a short sword of common steel, and battered my soldier’s lance aside. The shorter weapon had the advantage in the cramped confines of the hall, and my legionnaire fell back, fell down, and the refugee leaped atop him. I heard the noise of steel striking true, heard the man grunt.

“They’re . . . attacking us?” Cassandra’s eyes were wide.

Had we been deceived? Were the villagers plants after all? Worshippers,

servants, slaves of the Cielcin? *Scarheads*, to use poor Argo's word? But how could they be? They were native Danuans, and the siege had not gone on for very long.

Holden went out into the hall, his own sidearm drawn. He fired, discharging a round squarely into the back of the attacking Danuan.

Then another fell on him, cutting in from the right.

Cassandra leaped past me, moving before I could. Her blade sprouted in her fist, and the blood of the man who'd attacked Holden painted the far bulkhead red. I could hear the sounds of scuffle and panic filling the frigate then. Had we let a brood of vipers on board?

I pushed forward, grimacing with every halting, odd step.

Both our door guards lay dead, and the men who had slain them lay about them, blood red on the black floor. I stood amidst them, taking stock. Two of ours dead, three of theirs. Cassandra helped Holden to stand, redrew her sword.

There were many refugees seated along the edge of the hall further down, eyes wide, faces terrified. They were as lost as I was, and frightened. Old men, women with children huddled close. Somewhere not far, an infant had started crying. Thinking of Cassandra, of the long nights holding her in the manor on Jadd, I felt a pang of true terror, to think of so precious a creature in so terrible a place.

A woman screamed, far off, and the refugees still seated in the hall grew tense.

"Stay where you are!" I said, hand pressed to my wounded flank. "We don't know what's going on!" Any one of them could be an enemy. I studied their faces, looking for anything, any sign of danger lurking amidst the aged and the very young.

Then Ramanthanu emerged from the bridge behind me. Those nearest us stood, scrambling, backpedaled down the hall.

"This one is with us!" I shouted.

No good. Terror and confusion were stronger than any word, and many of the refugees turned and fled. Shouting went ahead of us. Somewhere a

woman screamed—louder than before. I heard sobbing, and the suit-amplified voices of my own men scrambling to coordinate in the chaos.

I had thrown my comms patch away in my contest with Dorayaica, could not speak with Orphan without engaging my wrist-terminal. We were deep in the storm, then. Deep in the labyrinth.

Then a man—a Danuan—emerged from a side passage, his suit-front dripping with gore. He held a stolen legionary sword, the blade white as anything, red-stained, the pommel black and gold. Seeing me, he charged. The pale ceramic blade drew back for a thrust.

I still remember his face: his wild snarl, his matted beard, his lips flecked with foam.

It is eyes I remember most sharply. They were like glass, like windows on an empty house—windows into nothing.

He's a SOM. The thought blossomed in me even as I kindled my blade, but I was not certain it was true.

Had he thought me unarmed?

A single stroke—rising left-to-right—was all it took to finish him. The Danuan fell in two pieces—as did his stolen sword.

“Centurion,” I said, not looking at the brutalized body that lay there at my feet. “Order your men to use disruptors. Set to stun.”

“My lord?”

“We don’t know what’s going on,” I said. “Use lethal force if necessary, but take as many as you can alive.”

We *were* outnumbered something like ten to one.

Cassandra stood by me, asked, “What about the other ships?”

I looked at her, at Ramanthanu, at Holden. “Wave Kithuun-Annaz. Find out.”

A handful of refugees had not dared move—nearly all of them women. I stopped by them, stood over them. “Get yourselves into one of the cabins,” I said. “Don’t come out until we send for you.”

“We don’t know what’s happening,” Cassandra said and, bending, tried to encourage the nearest woman—a young mother with a boy child barely able to stand—to rise and move. The refugee shied away at her touch, at the

sight of Ramanathanu and its kin. “Some of your people attacked us. We do not want to hurt you.”

She was wasting time. “Move!” I shouted.

More shots reverberated up the hall, and a moment later, two of our soldiers retreated into view. One of the refugees followed, brandishing a sword he had taken from one of my men. As they came into view, the refugee took a shot to the belly. He did not stop, but kicked off the wall of the corridor, leaping at the nearest of my men. He fell atop the soldier, hammering the man’s sallet with the pommel of his sword.

With a shout, Holden turned his disruptor on the refugee. The weapon *cracked* as it fired, ball lightning striking the wild Danuan. It should have dropped him like a dog, but it didn’t.

The man lurched, stymied a moment, and resumed hammering on the downed warrior, who threw his hand up to try and stop the blows. His fellow legionnaire—still standing—shot the refugee again, the round tore clean through the man’s face, and he fell atop the battered soldier.

All of this happened in less time than it takes to write about it.

I hurried to the succor of my two men, offered the battered man a hand. My side groaned in agony as I hauled him to his feet.

“They’re mad!” said the other. “They just attacked us, lord! The villagers! Killed Skarra and his boys in the hold. Four of them dragged Taline off somewhere—we couldn’t stop them, lord!”

They’re SOMs . . . The thought intruded once again.

It was possible . . . but it still did not make sense. They had not known we were coming, and the trap—if trap it was—seemed far too elaborate a thing to set on the off chance that an Imperial fleet might come to the planet’s rescue.

It didn’t make sense . . . none of it made sense.

“Are you all right?” I asked the man whose helmet had been battered half to breaking.

“Fine, sir,” he said, and tugged the broken helmet sparking off. His eyes were wide, but clear. “Entoptics are fucked, but the helmet took the worst of it.”

Somewhere ahead, a woman screamed, sobbed.

Cassandra did not hesitate, but pelted off after the sound. I called after her, limped as I ran. There were refugees still sitting—or half standing—paralyzed to one side of the hall. I paid them little mind as I went. The screaming worsened, and the hem of Cassandra's *mandyas* vanished round a corner up ahead.

"Cassandra!"

I understood her haste, though I feared for her, whom I had nearly lost so many times. But wounded as I was, I could not keep pace with her. Ramanthanu went ahead, and as it passed me, one of the Danuans lurched from a side passage. The Cielcin captain seized the man by the jaw and slammed him straight up into the low ceiling, let him fall flat on his face. I leaped over the man as Egazimn—close behind—stopped to drive a crooked knife into his back.

I heard a woman's voice then, a cry not of pain, not of terror, but fury—and knew it was my daughter's voice. I reached the door just behind her, found a scene as terrible as any I had seen in the pits of Dharan-Tun.

Four of them dragged Taline off somewhere . . .

We had found them—Cassandra had found them—and painted the walls with their blood. The last one, half-undressed, scrabbled toward the door. Seeing what had happened, what they had done to the woman bloodied and broken on the floor of the airlock antechamber, I did not hesitate to strike off his head.

Cassandra stood in the midst of them—the walls all round her spattered red. I have not forgotten her face—spattered red itself—as she turned to look at me, her eyes wet and shining, horrified, furious, confused. I went to her, turned her from the carnage she had caused.

They had cut the underlayment of Taline's suit to get at her, in so doing had slashed her thighs. "We need a medic!" I shouted to Holden, who swore when he reached the airlock door.

Ramanthanu stooped as it passed the gateway, head cocked to one side.

Abruptly I recalled that very creature's actions at the Battle of Sabratha,

how it had sorted the prisoners, how it thrown one captive woman to its men for sport.

Sport.

“*Mnaddayu!*” I hissed at the captain as it knelt beside the woman.
Don’t.

Huge black eyes turned to look at me, and it pressed fingers to Taline’s throat.

“*Wemashu raka oyade yukajji,*” it said.

“Dead?” I echoed.

Ramanthanu jerked its head in the affirmative. “Dead.”

I turned my back, eyes touching on the bodies of her killers. I froze. The one furthest from me was no Danuan at all. It was one of Ghoshal’s men. One of *mine*.

I looked round, at the body of Taline dead upon the corrugated metal floor, at the corpses of the men who had violated her, the score mark in one wall where Cassandra’s blade had cut the black metal. One of the Danuans lay dead at my feet, his eyes turned skyward. But it was not his eyes—transmuted to glass and distant—that held my attention.

It was his smile.

Dazed, I returned to the hall outside, found still more of the refugees milling about, uncertain where to go. The sounds of violence reverberated from the hold below, were spreading through the halls of the frigate.

“It’s all of them,” Holden said. “Just talked to the birds . . .”

My eyes had lighted on the woman standing at the end of the hall, a fixed point in the roil of confused refugees. The old men and children tottering about her seemed not to bother her. Her eyes did not leave my face. Though she dressed in the tattered clothes of a waterworker, her hair was dark, not Danuan red.

She smiled at me, and I cried out, lurching forward to face her.

But when I blinked, she was gone.

CHAPTER 34

THE TOUCH OF EVIL

“WE HAVE TO GET to the bridge,” I said, returning to the room of defilement. Cassandra had covered the body of the woman with a foil blanket taken from one of the emergency kits. Ramanthanu had not moved, but stood with its head cocked, its kin tense beside it, reminding me of a pack of dogs waiting for permission. To move? To feed?

I did not grant it.

“What?” Cassandra blinked at me, unable to tear her eyes from the carnage.

“We can’t stay here,” I said. “It’s the Watcher. She’s . . . in them.”

“In them?” Holden’s voice shook, and he blessed himself, making the sign of the sun disc—for all the good that feeble sigil could do. “Like a . . . daimon?”

They’re SOMs . . .

In a sense they were—as I had been, when I had borne her image in my mind. I recalled the touch of her fingers in my head. I thought of Valka, of Urbaine’s worm chewing on the machine nematodes that threaded her mind.

“Like a virus,” I said.

“What do we do?” Holden asked.

The Watchers were pure will, mind animating matter and energy, without form or substance of their own. They were a part of the universe itself, sewn into its fabric. There was nothing, no agency, no medicament, no treatment I knew of—save the hand of Ragama.

“I don’t know,” I said. Ushara’s shadow had remained on me even after she was gone. Defanged to an extent, yes. But not destroyed. “Kharn Sagara built this vessel to confuse their gaze. It may be that if we can move these

people into the heart of the ship, the Watcher will not reach them. Centurion.”

Holden stood straighter.

“Get your people to move the Danuans deeper into *Demiurge*. It doesn’t matter where. Stun any who oppose you, and leave them where they lie.” I leaned heavily on the door leading out of the cursed airlock, turned back to face my people. “If we cannot treat these people, we will put them all in fugue until we find someone who can. Cassandra. Cassandra?” She did not move. “Anaryan?”

The girl started, wrenched her eyes from Taline’s prone form. “What?”

“You have your comm?”

She nodded.

“Raise the bridge, tell Edouard what’s happening. Will you?”

She did not move.

“Cassandra!” I offered her my hand. “We need to go.”

“They were . . .” She shook her head. “What they were doing . . . I killed them.”

“I know,” I said.

“One was . . . one of ours . . .”

“I know that, too.” I gestured for her to come to me. To my surprise, Ramanathanu approached her, and wordless lay a hand upon her back, pushed her toward the door, toward myself.

“Get your hands off me, *davos!*” Cassandra hissed, rounding on the xenobite. “I bet you love this, don’t you? Being what you are.”

The xenobite only blinked at her.

When still she did not move—only bared her teeth at the Cielcin—I went to her, wrapped one arm around her and chivvied her from that place.

We had to step over the man I had killed to do so, and as we did, Holden asked, “Why hasn’t it gotten to us?”

The thought had already occurred to me, but I hoped not to have to answer it aloud. I was the only person on board that ship that I felt sure was safe from Ushara’s touch—perhaps the only person in all creation. “Let’s move.”

• • •

Many men lay dead in the hold when we came to it. Danuans. Legionnaires. Still more yet lived, huddled in knots along either wall. The rear hatch already stood open, and from the blood that shone upon the dark floor like wine, I guessed that there were those that had fled into the ship already—and those that had pursued them.

Demiurge had been my home then for many decades, but still I cannot say I knew it. Countless were its levels, its towers, its spiraling halls. Countless the doors I had never opened, the chambers I had never seen. The whole of it designed—by Kharn Sagara, and by Brethren itself—not just to house the Archontic weapons, but to conceal them. Sagara knew of the Watchers, knew what they were capable of. He had been present when the Mericanii that had built Vorgossos of old had experimented on the Watcher Selarnim.

“The ship was built to confound the eyes of *those above*,” Orphan told me once, on one of our many walks through the ship. “Its shape stands at right angles to those dimensions our eyes—” the black-haired head explained.

“*Your* eyes,” its pale-headed companion interjected, snapping at its fellow.

“—cannot see.”

I thought I understood. If we humans were mites in the pages of a book, and our universe were but one leaf that we might chew our way along and through, encountering the edges of letters—and if the Watchers were as men staring down at the open folio . . . then the structure of *Demiurge* was like charcoal blotting out the text, or like a hand obscuring a portion of the page.

There was fighting in the hold outside, on the gangways and catwalks that ran between the massive starship’s fleet of frigate shuttles. My men were badly outnumbered—locally at least.

“Edouard!” I shouted into my terminal as we emerged onto the gangway,

relying on the thing's small speaker. "The Watcher has taken hold of the men we brought from Danu. They've gone mad!"

The HAPSIS man did not reply at once. "Taken . . . hold?"

"Not all of them, but we're outnumbered here. How long before the jump?"

"Minutes," came the reply. I had to hope the jump would break the monster's spell.

"We need reinforcements in the shuttle bay and surrounding sections. Tell all your men to set weapons to stun."

Edouard's voice came through a moment later. "What's going on down there, exactly?"

We all halted a moment on the gangway, intricate ironwork all around. I looked at Cassandra, at Holden—his eyes wide with fear. "It's . . ." I hesitated a moment before answering. "It's like they're possessed."

Edouard gave no answer, not at once. When he did, his answer was drowned out by a man's terrible cry. Cassandra went ahead of me—my wound was taking its toll. A man ran across the end of the gangway, left to right. One of the Danuans. Two of *my* men followed, their guns abandoned. The Danuan tripped on the corrugated metal floor, fell with a desperate cry of "Help! Help!" As we reached the end of the gangway, I saw one of my legionnaires leap atop the fallen man. Before I understood what was happening, the legionnaire seized the Danuan by his hair, slammed his face into the floor once, twice, three times—and did not stop.

The sudden, animal brutality of it all shocked me to momentarily stillness. A black despair took root in me then, blossomed like a terrible flower. I had not known the Watcher was capable of such as this, of twisting the hearts and minds of those it touched. Ushara had planted a seed in my mind, but I had never lost control—not like this. But would I have, in time?

Ramanthanu surged past me, pulled the man from his Danuan prey and hurled him bodily across the hold. The legionnaire struck the wall inverted, fell to the deck in a clangor of armor. His companion rounded on the Cielcin captain, a bloody knife in hand. "You horned bastard!" he spat, and lunged.

The captain caught the man's wrist. That should have stopped it. No plebeian was a match for the Pale strength for strength. But the strength that was in the maddened legionnaire was like nothing human, and the blade skittered across Ramanthanu's breastplate. Shocked, the inhuman captain slammed its bony forehead down into the man's exposed face, shattered his nose.

"Stun them!" I shouted, gesturing to Holden and his people. "Stun them, damn you!"

One of Holden's men obliged, but the man with the busted face did not fall. Unsteadily, he found his knees, eyes bright, blood on his broken teeth as he smiled. A second stunner bolt caught him square in the face as he rose. Surely the socket of one eye at least had broken beneath the Cielcin's blow, which ought to have put the man down and properly, but he seemed hardly to notice.

A third stunner bolt took him, and he leaped at Ramanthanu. Again the Cielcin seized the man by his arms, threw him head over heels into the bulkhead.

The stunners *were not working*.

How?

The first man had found his feet again—or almost found them. For a brief moment, he crawled, scrabbling on hands and feet like a dog, like an ape out of Earth's long-vanished jungles. I felt our eyes meet, sensed *her* eyes behind his.

Then he leaped at me. My own soldier.

And Cassandra stepped between us, blade rising in an arc.

"No!" I tried to stop her.

Too late.

The man with the broken face leaped at her—heedless of the blade burning in my daughter's hand. A single stroke took his head from his shoulders.

"This can't continue . . ." Cassandra said, killing her blade.

"Hadrian?" Edouard's voice interjected, carrying over the comm. "Hadrian, what's going on?"

“It’s our men, too,” I said. “Is Princess Selene safe?”

“She’s on *Ascalon*. In the hold, with her knight and your butler.”

“Tell Neema to lock the ship down,” I said. “And clear the bridge. Leave none but yourself and Orphan.” A terrible thought occurred to me then. Could Ushara take Orphan for her own? Surely *Demiurge* offered some protection, and the bridge must have been doubly protected, but if the Watcher prevailed, if it could suborn the pilot . . . “Edouard . . .” I could almost hear the gears in the other man’s head ticking. “You’ll do what you have to . . .”

“*Oui*.”

“All right,” I said to him, then to the others. “All right. Let’s move.” I lay a hand on Cassandra’s shoulder, made to steer her away from the bodies.

She wouldn’t move. “They’re acting like *them*,” she said in Jaddian, glaring at Ramanthanu and its kin.

The thought had occurred to me.

What might the Cielcin have been without the Watchers’ influence, I wondered? Will those few that survived me ever be free of it? Of them? Their very name, *Cielcin* meant *godsborne*. Whatever they would be, whatever they might become . . . it would not be *Cielcin*.

Gunshots echoed in the distance, clashing with the strangled cries of men and women, the ring of feet on the metal floor. Somewhere, an infant cried, a woman shrieked.

“The best thing we can do for these people is to get out of this system as fast as we can,” I said. I searched my memory, the memories of ten thousand lives I have not lived, searched for anything even remotely resembling that terrible instant. There was nothing. No solution.

We were on new ground.

“You there!” Holden’s voice slashed across my awareness. He aimed his lance at a darkened corner. “Hands up!”

We had left the gangway and entered the vestibule beyond—a kind of locker room where disused environment suits waited in mechanical berths for a crew that had never come.

“Don’t shoot!” The boy who emerged from behind one of the black

metal suits could not have been older than fifteen, sixteen standard years. He had the Danuan red mane, the pale complexion. The same green eyes, the same prominent ears, the same spattering of freckles.

Switch lived again, his face and form re-created by the caprice of nucleic acids. His eyes went wide at the sight of Ramanthanu, Egazimn, and Otomno.

"It's all right," I said, glancing at the xenobites. "They're mine."

"Yours?"

"There are more," said one of Holden's men. "Come out!"

I could hear startled shifting behind the racked equipment.

"Out!" said the legionnaire again.

"Put the gun down, soldier," I said, and laid a hand on the man's weapon. To the boy I said, "What's your name, lad?"

I knew the answer before he gave it. "William, sir," he said. "For the Emperor."

"For the Emperor." I nodded. To the room at large, I said, "You can come out. We won't hurt you."

I saw green eyes, red hair, white faces. Three boys and a girl, each of them younger than young William. Their eyes were wide and terrified. The girl had blood on her face—badly wiped away. Their names were Victor—after the son of the God Emperor—and Hector, and Irene. They huddled together, rightly terrified.

"You have your minds?" I asked.

"The others . . ." The girl sniffed. "Uncle Donar . . . killed my da, he . . . he tried to . . . why?" She started shaking.

Cassandra went to her, knelt and whispered words I could not hear.

"You've lived on Danu all your life?" I asked.

The boy William swallowed. "'Til now."

"No one came to village, no one from offworld?"

The boy shook his head.

They were not Cielcin worshippers, then.

"You all need to come with us," I said. "The further we can get from here, the safer you'll be."

“What’s happening?” asked Victor, who was shorter and heavier than William. They might have been brothers. “Everyone went crazy. My ma, she . . .”

“She killed herself,” William said, and shut his eyes.

How could I possibly explain? “It’s the Cielcin,” I said. “They have a . . . a weapon. We can keep you safe, but you have to come with us. Now.”

“Are you really the Halfmortal?” William asked.

I did not deny it.

“My granda, he used to light candles to you. Said you’d be the Emperor one day. That you’d save us all.”

I wanted to ask—did not ask—what his granda’s name had been, if he, too, had been a William. The answer would not have given me clarity. There was shouting just outside the locker room. Two of Holden’s men had already sealed the way behind us, held posts by the door.

“We have to go!” the centurion said.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” William asked. “You can save us?”

“Yes,” I said, sparing a glance for the door. “Now come on. Cassandra, Holden, take the lead. The Cielcin and I will follow. Children: You stay between us, eh?”

My terminal chimed, and Edouard’s voice crackled over the comm. “Ghoshal’s bringing reinforcements himself. He’s on the tram.”

I held the terminal to my face, spoke into it. “Understood, A2.”

“Where are you?”

“About a mile from the platform. We’ve picked up four survivors. Children.”

“Children . . .” Edouard paused. “Holy Mary, Mother of God . . . all right.”

“Tell Henric stunners don’t seem to work. We unloaded three and four shots into these people.”

“How is that possible?” Edouard sounded shocked.

“I don’t know,” I answered, lingering at a crossway in the winding halls as the children hurried past. Little Hector set our pace. “We could hardly slow them down.”

“I’ve told Orphan to lock down the section. We can keep them all contained . . .”

“They can still do a lot of damage,” I said. “Tell Henric he may have to put some of them down to save the rest.”

Something moved out the corner of my eye, down one of the side passages. Turning, I saw nothing, thought I’d seen the drifting black hem of a robe, thought I’d felt the rippling of space itself.

We’ve not gone far enough . . .

A fey laugh sounded from around one distant bend, and I jerked my head toward it.

“What is it?” asked the boy, William of Danu.

“Did you hear that?”

Blank stares. The children shook their heads, and Holden said, “Hear what?”

“Laughing,” Cassandra said.

Our eyes met. Her unkindled blade was in her hand. She held the weapon to her breast.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Holden said.

“We’re almost there,” she replied.

As she turned to go, a terrible howling filled the hall away to our left and behind us. The children tensed, and Holden shouted, “Run!”

The centurion spurred William and his young companions on, and wheeled, raising his lance as the figures of five men came into view. Three Danuans, two legionnaires. At the sight of their commander, the legionnaires both stopped, and the Danuans with them. For a moment, all five were terribly still.

Then one of the legionnaires, still helmed and fully armored, raised his lance. “Centurion! You’re alive!”

At the sound of the man’s voice, I halted, lingered alongside poor Holden, left to face his own men.

“Joti?” Holden’s voice cracked. “Is that you?”

“Give us the children!” said one of the Danuans. “We’ll keep them safe.” His teeth were bared, an expression at once grimace and grin.

“Go back and help the others!” Holden said, his lance leveled at the oncomers.

“How do we know you’re not like *them*?” asked the man, Joti.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Holden said. “Whose blood is that on you?”

In answer, Joti fired his weapon. The plasma bolt struck Holden full in his unhelmed face, and though his shield bore the brunt of the assault, he staggered, singed.

“The boys are mine!” cried one of the Danuans, charging forward. He had no weapon. I stepped in front of the poor centurion. The big man swung at me, and I ducked—wounded side blazing white fire—and hammered the fellow in the face with the simurgh-headed pommel of my sword. I felt his teeth shatter, and the big man staggered back, cackling as he held his busted mouth.

“They’re gone,” I said, “*Ramanthanu-kih!*”

The Cielcin leaped past me. One of them—Otomno, I think—stooped to gore the man called Joti with its horns. But the legionnaire caught the Cielcin and turned its neck as though he were some superhuman matador and the xenobite only some charging bull. Ramanthanu fared better. If I had compunctions about killing these men, the Cielcin surely did not. The Cielcin captain plunged its blade into the chest of one of the gray-haired Danuan. SOM-like, the man grabbed the xenobite captain by the wrist and pulled the blade *deeper* as he reached for the Cielcin’s neck. He did not falter, not even when the captain twisted its blade. With inhuman strength, the man seized Ramanthanu by its one remaining horn and pulled, bending the captain down even as he rushed forward, pushing Ramanthanu into the bulkhead. The big xenobite struck the wall and fell.

In that exact moment, *Demiurge* jumped.

Such were the strength of the behemoth’s fields that the jolt was confined to a thing felt by the stomach. No one was yanked from their feet, hurled into walls. Still, *something* happened. Something changed. For the gray-haired man of Danu. For the legionnaire called Joti.

“What?” The Danuan man looked down at the scimitar protruding from

his belly, grasped it with both his hands. The blade was so long he could never have pulled it out himself, not without releasing the hilt. He looked at me, at Ramanathanu—half kneeling at his feet. His face contorted with pain. “What?” he said again, and looked to me for answers. “Where . . . ? Why?”

He must have moved the blade, for he cried out in pain, and fell over. The sound he made was less than human, an animal’s piteous whine. As I hoped—then feared—the jump to warp had disrupted Ushara’s influence.

Edouard’s voice issued from my terminal, doubtless with the news that we’d leaped to orbit about Danu. I hardly heard him.

I wish that I’d had the presence of mind, the clarity, to order the surviving men all stunned in that moment. It would have saved their lives. Instead, I held back, not wholly sure what to do, to see an enemy so transformed into an innocent. The gray-haired Danuan fell to his knees, panic setting in as blood galloped from the wound in his belly.

“I killed him . . .” he said, weeping. “Hagen, my own . . . brother, I—”

I never learned for certain, but I thought that surely here was the girl Irene’s uncle, Donar.

“I killed him . . . Kill me . . .” His eyes were on me. “Please.”

I almost wish I had.

The other men were reeling, looking round, confused. I could not sense Ushara in them, but then her shadow had fallen on my own heart only intermittently once the beast was sundered from me.

“*Ijanammaa!*” I said, ordering the Cielcin to heel. Ramanathanu had been stalking nearer, ready to seize the moment of stillness to its advantage.

The captain halted.

“*Raka wemashu,*” it said, pointing at the dying man. “You cannot save this one.”

Having been skewered myself, I shook my head. “If we can get him to medica . . .”

We might have mere minutes before Ushara’s grip on the poor fellow returned. I looked up the hall. Cassandra and the children had gone. The medica was far away, but if the fellow held out for the tram ride and the

walk that followed—and if he did not, there was much the ship’s auto-surgeon might accomplish, even in the recently deceased.

A thought occurred to me. “There might be fugue storage nearby.”

Holden had regained his footing, though he groaned and swore and clutched his head. The plasma round had flash-burned much of his face, left the skin blistered and peeling, weeping blood. His eyebrows both were gone, but he was on his feet, still held his lance. The man wanted attention himself, needed the same corrective tank Cassandra had gotten after her battle with the Sentinel commander.

I felt the weight of all their lives like chains upon my shoulders.

Why should your burden be light?

The Quiet’s words sounded in my ears.

As if they heard my thought, the men in the hall laughed as one, and my heart turned to stone to hear the sound. Our short jump had not bought the men deliverance, not for long.

“You cannot save them!” the men all said as one. “You cannot prevail!”

The man with the sword buried in his guts—Donar, if I had my guess—stood.

“You are nothing!” he said, and it was Ushara who spoke through him—and through the others. “Your kind were a mistake, an accident! This world is ours! It will be ours! It will—”

A shot flashed over my shoulder, its beam silent, almost invisible. The man’s head exploded like overripe fruit. The body lurched forward a step before it fell.

Holden cursed, turned his lance on the one called Joti. I saw the legionnaire’s shield break, heard Holden roar as Joti shot at him again, but the shot went wide.

Then Joti fell smoking.

Ramanthanu leaped back into the fray, taking up its sword as what remained of Ushara’s puppets rushed toward us.

The whole exchange was over in an instant.

Five men lay dead.

“That wasn’t Joti,” Holden said.

I looked at him. The man was a on the very brink, held together by pure adrenaline.

“No,” I said, averting my eyes as Egazimn swung its scimitar, striking the head from the Danuan whose smile I had destroyed. “His soul was dead.”

“What is this?” the man asked.

“Evil, Centurion,” I said only, and nodding to his injuries, added, “take your stim.”

“I can make it.”

“You’re in shock,” I said, feeling my own wound burning beneath my hand. “Take your stim.”

Stonily, the centurion unclipped his atomizer—the Imperial sun stenciled on the can. He inhaled sharply, took it in like a jubala smoker, held the substance in his lungs. I could see the pharmacon take effect, in the brittle tension of the man’s limbs, the way he stood a little straighter. He shook himself.

“We go?” asked Ramanathanu, speaking the standard.

“We go,” I agreed, slouching toward the tram port, toward Cassandra. “We go.”

CHAPTER 35

A GALAXY OF FEAR

I KNEW BUT LITTLE then of what passed outside that terrible ship. I would later see the footage—watch the holograph models play out. Orphan had fired the *Darklight* cannons the instant we emerged from warp, destroying three of the enemy's worldships in the first five seconds of the engagement. Lin's own bombing had already destroyed another, and Sattha Kull . . .

I had never seen the Tavrosi *thathing* in action, never seen their ships at war. If I had, I would have questioned how it was the Imperial armada maintained its dominion over the stars—might have concluded something like the truth of the Chantry much sooner. Like the Latarran Interfaced—like poor, doomed 2Maeve and her people—the Tavrosi did not conjure ghosts from the machine, did not mutilate man's consciousness the way the half-human ship minds of *Demiurge* and its frigates did. Instead, they pooled their resources, networked their collective consciousness to create an emergent intelligence—a singular will—greater than the sum of its parts.

It was the same principle the Mericanii had used when they networked the minds of their civilian population to serve the iron gods they'd made, only their daimons had filled in the corners of their hosts' minds; the Tavrosi had no daimons at all. The *thathing* was a product of their shared cognition, a phantasm born of the congress of each ship's crew's collective minds.

While they traveled, the crew of each Tavrosi vessel occupied a state—like fugue—that saw them immersed in tanks, cabled into the network via the nodes at the base of each demarchist's neck. I would later watch those ships execute maneuvers that would kill any ordinary crew. Secure in their tanks—breathing the oxygenated fluid—the Tavrosi were effectively cushioned against accelerations and vector changes that would kill the crew

of any Imperial vessel. They were so small—like gnats measured against the immensity of the Cielcin worldships—but they cut a bloody swath of destruction with their drivers. Their primary weapons were seeming-small-caliber mass accelerators, railguns of the sort old Quentin Sharp had carried, if larger. These fired hollow-heart tungsten shells, each the size of an orange, each housing a kernel of antilithium the size of the end of man's thumb. The ablative outer shell was meant to carry the antimatter through dozens of feet of solid rock. The antimatter was meant to annihilate whatever lay beneath.

Not a one of them was large enough to crack a Cielcin worldship in one—the fuel reservoirs were naturally kept deep inside the rocky vessels—but they could shred surface installations, cripple engines . . . and did.

Wounded, running through the halls of my own ship, hounded by my own men and the refugees we had risked nigh all to save, I was ignorant of all of this.

Whole moons cracked as the weapons of the Mericanii breached their secret hearts, their rubble scattering across the orbits of that doomed world. Danu died that day, despite Edouard's efforts—his protestations. Her only survivors were those taken aboard my ship—out of danger into danger—or in the hands of the Cielcin. Dharan-Tun had been there and gone, had doubtless carried tens, hundreds of thousands of men and women away.

But the swath of destruction we cut that day would be long remembered by the enemy—should have been long remembered. As matters stand it was but the prologue, the foretaste of the fire that was to come.

• • •

We reached the tram platform mere minutes behind Cassandra and the children, Holden twitching irritably, jerking his lance round as he cleared sight lines ahead. The pain in my side was mounting, so much that I considered the use of the atomizer myself.

Memory of Dorayaica's crumbling face—of the god-thing peering out at

me—haunted my every step. It would not be long before the beast attained full strength again, not long before Dorayaica grasped the full godhood it so ardently desired.

Where is your god, kinsman? The Prophet's words were like a barb, like a claw in my heart. *Why does he not save you?*

I knew the answer.

Because he had sent me. *I* was his champion, his instrument. But what was I measured against the Watchers? I am a gnat, and less than a gnat, measured against Ushara, against Miudanar, against any one of their kin.

A paramecium. A germ.

But might a germ not slay even the mightiest of dragons?

The thought comforted me, and I took heart—buoyed by the sight of my daughter waiting on the tramway platform, beneath one of the high-breasted caryatids that supported the overhead rail, the children gathered round her.

"What happened?" Cassandra asked, marking Holden's burned face.

"Should have worn my helmet," the centurion answered. "Where's the tram?"

"On its way," she said, pointing up at the indicator lamp atop a black metal post. "Section's locked down. No one's getting out."

I sank onto a bench built along one wall. It was difficult to imagine *Demiurge* as a place men were meant to live, difficult to imagine that anyone had ever sat in that bench before, that anyone had been intended to sit there.

Cassandra turned to me, brows low and together. "You all right?"

I smiled up at her. "There is pain, girl," I said, "but I could ask the same of you."

She averted her eyes. She was not wounded, save in her soul. Horrible as the rape of Taline had been for me to witness, I knew that horror held a different character for her—doubly so, for she had avenged it, and vengeance is but cold comfort for the one who obtains it, for the avenger must live with himself.

With herself.

"I did not want this life for you," I said.

She tensed, green eyes narrowing. “You’re not the one who decides.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not.”

“It isn’t right,” Cassandra said. “It isn’t right that he should *leave us to them* like this. If the Quiet really is so powerful, he should destroy them himself. Why these games?”

I had no straight answer. Only the insight I had gleaned beside the cradle of a god in that time still yet to be. I looked at her—my daughter—in whom dwelt all my hope and heart. “Because *they’re* his children, too,” I said, and looked at Ramanthanu. “The Cielcin . . . *and* the Watchers. I think—I have to think—that it’s better this way. Better that we fight . . . because if he ended it. Ended it *now*, they would be lost . . . and us along with them. But if the battle continues, if even one of them changes side. Is that not a victory? Isn’t ending everything *now* the ultimate defeat? Would you kill yourself from despair?”

Those words tugged the still-fresh memory of the Danuan man begging for death across the surface of my mind, his heart shattered, his body pierced, his mind half stolen away.

“Would you have him euthanize us all? Put the universe out of its misery? You? Me? Everything?”

She had no answer for me.

“Rarely do we choose our road,” I said, and smiled. “But we *can* choose how we walk it. Every day.” The pain in my side flared. “This is not over. Not this battle. Not the war. Not yet.” As I spoke, visions floated back to me. Visions of a white light—of a cleansing fire—washing over all.

I knew what I had to do, what he wanted me to do.

Did I have the will to do it?

“Are we going to die?” asked the girl, Irene, her eyes shining.

Distantly the noise of battle returned, the piercing cries of my Irchtani rallying against Ushara’s deranged victims. Their clamor was far off. I smiled and, groaning, stood. “Not today.”

I heard another sound, one nearer, softer, sweeter: The faint hum and whine of the tram that was to carry us to the forward section and the bridge. It grew louder as I approached the lip of the platform, saw the gate that

barred the tramway open to admit the black-glass carriage. Sleek as a bullet it was, head tapered like the head of a viper, body of metal and mirrored glass. I rested a hand on the child's head as I stepped past her to greet my own reflection in the door.

It leered at me, reflecting something other than myself.

I lurched back, forcing Otomno to catch me.

The doors opened, and Captain Ghoshal appeared, the car behind him packed with the men of his crew.

"Lord Marlowe!" Ghoshal said, a look of relief coloring his handsome palatine features. "I am relieved to find you well! You're unhurt?"

His voice—so human, so humane—was like soft rain after a season of drought.

"Wounded," I said.

"What is it?" he asked, stepping off the car, his soldiers—there must have been half a hundred of them—close behind. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Abba," Cassandra said. "On the floor."

"What's that, girl?" Ghoshal asked, looking down. "Oh, Laxman? It's nothing. Pay it no mind."

The man on the floor of the tram car had been stripped naked. From the look of things, he had been stomped to death.

Ghoshal seemed hardly to notice, adjusted his tunic primly. "I've brought the reinforcements you requested."

There was blood on the boots of the legion men at his back, on their armor. One or two clutched knives.

"Henric," I asked him. "What have you done?"

"Like I told the little lady," Ghoshal said. "It's nothing. Laxman had it coming."

"Had it coming, sir?" Holden stepped forward, lance under his arm, aimed at his captain. "It's got to you?"

"Got to me?" Ghoshal looked round, unable to suppress the smile on his face. "Got to me? What are you talking about, son?" He blinked, seemed to

notice the children for the first time. “Are those survivors? Best give them to me. The boys here will take care of them.”

Irene pressed nearer my side, peering out from under my arm.

Cassandra stepped forward. Her sword was in her hand.

“Laxman’d been with us for years,” the Sabrathan centurion said. “He was one of ours, and you . . . killed him.”

Ghoshal didn’t answer. His smile was almost rectangular, all teeth beneath the oiled mustache. His eyes were dull. The eyes of a shark. Behind him, one of the soldiers began to laugh.

“What do we do?” asked one of the other soldiers in my little group, retreating. We were perhaps a dozen, not counting the Danuan children. They were five times our number.

“I don’t want to kill you, Henric,” I said.

“And why not?” the captain asked. “We will all die this day.”

“Is that so?” I asked. Still more of his soldiers had started laughing, softly, haltingly.

Ghoshal’s smile was a thing all teeth. It was a Cielcin smile. As though some unseen hand that gripped his throat had at once released him, Ghoshal bent double, gasping. After a moment he looked up. When he did, his eyes were shining. “Marlowe?” he said, and looked over his shoulder at the body of the naked man. “What is this? Did I . . . Laxman—Holy Mother Earth—we killed him.”

For the briefest instant, I thought it was over, thought Ushara had fled. Had we jumped to warp again already? Had we fled Danu at the last? Or was it *Demiurge*? Had some shifting of her internal components caused the deflection of the Watcher’s will? It was not the former, I later learned. Possibly it was the latter. Or possibly it was only the Watcher’s caprice, a little cruelty from the Watcher then, in the fellow’s final moments.

There was blood on Ghoshal’s face, his boots, his hands, all down the front of his tunic. He touched his sodden shirtfront, his belt. “The woman . . . the woman, she was . . . here. She was *here*.” He touched his head. Behind him, his men seemed as confused, and shifted to make space between themselves and the fellow they had destroyed and defiled. “She

sang to me. She *sang*.” He hunched over, hands on his knees as if he were about to vomit. “She sang. She sang. She sang . . . I—I—I . . . what is happening to me?”

“It’s the Watcher, Henric,” I said.

“The Watcher?” His eyes sharpened. “The Watcher?” The smile returned, with it a rough, half-formed laugh, a single rasping sound. “We are gods, my brother and I.”

She had returned.

“You are nothing to him,” Ghoshal said. “You are dust! He uses you, like he used us! When he is done with you, you will die—and there will be nothing.”

I knew what must happen. Still I stayed my hand. Lost or not, taken or not . . . these were my own men.

“You know what he did to us,” Ushara said, using Ghoshal for a mouthpiece. “He will abandon you, too. He has done it before.”

“What does he mean?” Cassandra asked.

“You know this is not the first world he has made,” Ushara said. “It will not be the last.”

“Abba?”

“We can *cut* him out,” Ushara said. Ghoshal’s voice was high and low at once, as though two voices issued from his throat. “We can take this world for our own. Together.” Ghoshal extended a hand, palm up.

In that moment, the man became little more than a covering, a gauzy membrane through which a clear light shone. It was not his hand thrust toward me, but *hers*, and I saw her then completely, not veiled, but luminous, pure and perfect. Tall she was as any queen, taller—it seemed in that moment—than any Cielcin. Her curtainous black hair fell in a snaking braid over one shoulder almost to her jeweled feet. She wore nothing, nothing but the golden bangles that twined about her arms and wrists, her ankles and her delicate, long neck. Her skin was pale as alabaster, her heavy breasts rose-crowned, and the scent of her was spice and strong wine.

Abruptly, a laugh broke through the spell. “Together?” It was my own

rough laugh that had answered her, my own rough voice that challenged. “Is that what you promised the Vaiartu? What was their reward? Remind me.”

They had killed themselves. Extinguished their entire race when they had failed to extinguish all creation. They had courted the Watchers and met destruction, just as the Cielcin, their heirs, would be destroyed.

Ushara did not answer, but clenched her jaw, bit down. Blood like wine issued from her lips, ran down that fine throat and over those swelling breasts. I recoiled, and she spat Henric Ghoshal’s tongue at me.

“Die then!” said one of the others, voice amplified by his suit, flattened until it was the voice of every legionnaire, the voice of Empire.

“Death!” another cried, and still another. “Death!”

Gone was the bloody queen. Where she had stood, there was only what remained of Captain Ghoshal, blood pouring from his mouth. He leaped at me, gun in hand. Cassandra stepped between us, her own sword singing to life as she turned and—whirling—struck off the captain’s head. Our eyes touched for a moment, and in that moment, I did not know my own daughter.

Then she turned, and returning struck one legionnaire a bloody blow. The armor of the rank and file is ceramic, not adamant. The poor man fell at once, and—heart breaking—I conjured my own blade.

Both my blades.

“Give us the children!” one of the possessed men said. “You are nine! We are half a hundred!”

Snarling, Cassandra cut two men down in an instant. She said nothing, not even when a shot impacted her shield.

The men in the tram surged forward, moving not as a unit, not as men coordinated—but as a mob. I leaped to aid her. The bladed head of an energy lance descended toward my head. I parried, severing the haft and the hand that swung it. “Back!” I said. “Back! Into the halls!”

The girl did not hear me. She thrust her blade through the gut of another man, dragged the weapon up through breastplate and ribs to sever the heart. She kicked the man to the ground. Holden opened fire, and his companions with him, but their lances and their stunners could not break their shields.

The Cielcin leaped into the fray, scimitars more like clubs as they shattered the men's ceramic plate.

"Retreat!" I shouted, and again, "*Vasakiannaa!*"

Young William shepherded the other children back. One of the new-made enemy attempted to run past me, and I thrust the sword in his direction. He halted, empty hands raised. Red blood spattered his visor, decorated his segmented breastplate.

"You going to kill us, lord?" he said, and tore off his helmet. The face beneath was barely human, disfigured by that monstrous grin. "You going to kill me? You'd better."

The point of my sword hovered mere inches from his chest.

"We're going to kill you. And your girl. And the children."

I would not let Ushara goad me.

But the captive legionnaire did the last thing I could have expected then: He stepped forward. The point of my blade passed clean through his armored chest without the barest hint of resistance. Shocked, I yanked the sword away, in so doing carving a trench through the man's ribs, severing the left arm. He fell leering, rolling to look up at me.

His lips moved, and although blood issued from his lips in place of words, I understood him perfectly.

Am I a good man?

Then a hand seized me round the ankle and hauled me down. Only centuries of training kept my own swords from spelling the death of me. A weight settled on my right arm as hands closed over my free hand, holding both weapons at bay. I saw my reflection in the visor of the man holding me, face contorted with pain. I was sure the wound Dorayaica had dealt me had reopened deep inside. Still I strained, eager to turn my blades, to lift the bastard off me. It no longer mattered that he was Ushara's slave, no longer mattered that he had been my servant, my ally all these years. We were only two men, two animals.

One of us had to die.

I tried to turn my swords, to angle the blade to cut into the man's arms, his face, but the strength in his arms was incredible, far greater than any

plebeian should possess. Slowly, inexorably, my own blades bent toward *me*.

Then the man was gone, hauled off me and up into the air. One of the lesser Cielcin—Egazimn, I think, it of the broader face and eviler countenance—had seized my would-be destroyer by the scruff of his neck and hurled him bodily against the tram carriage. Ramanthanu itself helped me to my feet.

“Retreat!” I shouted again, seeing the rise and fall of Cassandra’s blade, and her kick that knocked a man straight back and off his feet. Shots pinged against my shield, hers, and one of Holden’s men fell with a bayonet in his throat. “Cassandra! The children!”

She took off another man’s head.

“Cassandra!”

Holden seized her by the *mandyas*, shouted for her to fall back. She shoved the man away, but she followed, leaping from the tram platform.

We had to get deeper into the ship, had to escape Ushara’s influence, to confuse her sight.

My heart broke for Henric Ghoshal, for the home he would never return to, for the son he would never see. I never spoke of his ending, never set down the details of his fate. Though I considered myself a lord no longer, still I would lodge a report in the days to come. *Lord Henric Ghoshal died fighting in orbit above Danu, I wrote, taken by enemy infiltrators on board our flagship.*

“The tramway!” I said, pointing with Olorin’s old sword. “Into the tunnel!”

Young William of Danu was the first to obey, showing remarkable level-headedness in the face of so much horror, so unlike the original. Irene rode on his back, arms about his shoulders. Victor ran beside him, and little Hector. William leaped down the short way, Holden’s scant men hard behind. The tunnel ran straight away from the platform along *Demiurge’s* major axis for dozens of miles.

Cassandra leaped past me. Stopping on the lip, I turned, marking the

horde behind. We had left a dozen dead on the platform—poor Ghoshal included—though we had lost two of our nine.

But our blades had not deterred the enemy. They followed, laughing and shouting, firing their guns.

“Ramanthanu!” I called.

The captain turned to look at me.

I tossed him Olorin’s sword. The blade vanished as it flew, but the Cielcin caught it, nostrils flared. A moment later the weapon cycled, reactivated in the alien hand. The captain turned, scimitar in one hand, highmatter blade in the other, and clove one of Ushara’s pawns in two. I left it there to hold the rear with its kin and leaped from the platform. Cassandra and Holden had already gone ahead, chasing the children up the tunnel. If we could but reach an access hatch, have it sealed behind us . . .

An access hatch . . . The thought was like lightning in the night. I fumbled with my terminal. “Edouard!”

Static hissed over the line, but I heard the other Delian’s voice, his words indistinct, his cadence unmistakable.

“The *uthras*!” I shouted. “Have Orphan send the *uthras* down the tramway nearest the shuttles! We’re being overrun!”

“Overrun?”

“Ghoshal is dead!” I said. “The Watcher took him! His men are trying to kill us!”

A terrible weight struck my shoulder, a blow that staggered me, dropped me to my knees.

Had it been an inch to the right, it might have cloven my skull.

I heard a scream, and turning found one of the Cielcin looming over me. It was Egazimn, who had saved me mere moments before.

“*Qatamonyu caihanarin uja ba-caihanarin*,” it said.

There are no gods but ours.

Seeing the power of its fathers’ gods, it had turned again. It raised its blade to do what even Dorayaica could not, what only Otiolo had done.

A shot caught Egazimn full in the face, and the giant fell back. Turning

to look up the hall, I saw wild-eyed Holden glowering down the length of his lance, Cassandra peering back beside him.

The burned centurion tapped his chest in salute, and behind me Ramanthanu and Otomno leaped into the trench. If the death of their companion troubled them, they gave no sign.

“What do we do?” asked one of Holden’s men.

“Keep running!” I roared. “Cover the children!”

“You go,” said Holden, not lowering his weapon.

Stopping my forward moment, I looked at the man, his eyes wide from the stim, his face half-burned away. I said nothing, knowing the fellow’s mind.

“I’ll slow them down,” he said.

“You’ll die!” Cassandra said.

“I’m already dead,” the centurion said, “atomizer’s just kept my brain from getting word.”

“*Skubus!*” Cassandra cursed in her native Jaddian. She had been far nearer death herself after her fight with Kedron. “Come on!”

Holden ignored her, stalked a few paces back along the tunnel. He fired. “Get the kids out of here,” he said.

“Centurion . . .” I said. “They’ll kill you.”

“*They*”—Holden clenched his teeth—“are *my men*.” He never took his eyes off the coming terror. “Let me do this.”

There was no time to argue, no time to change his mind. Wordless, I lay a hand on his shoulder as I passed.

Avenge us! The words rang constant in my ears. *Avenge us! Avenge us!*

I was on *Tamerlane* again, rushing up that tramway to the waiting *Ascalon*.

If only the *uthras* would hurry.

“Forward!” I said, and—limping—started to run. I heard Holden adjust the power levels on his lance then: a series of mechanical clicks. Behind me, Holden fired, lance chiming in the echoing void. He fired again, shot throwing light against the dark metal walls, as vividly green as the walls of Phanamhara.

He fired again.

Again.

I did not look back. Not when the firing ended. Not when the screaming began.

The *uthras* found him in pieces when the fighting was done, and those pieces we laid to rest in the garden, where the nightcap lilies bloom.

But he did not die alone.

Fully seven of his brothers—Ushara's slaves all—fell with him.

Bolts of coherent light skated off the walls to either side of us, off the roof overhead, boiled the air between us. Ghoshal's men were hard behind, whooping and hollering, crying out their mad challenges. More than one had removed his helmet, and one had stripped entire, his body smeared with gore.

"You won't escape!" he cried, foremost of his little pack. "You can't protect them, lord!"

"You're going to die!"

"We'll make you watch!" another cried. "We'll make you watch what we do to them!"

"—what we'll do to *her*!"

"You'll beg for death!" The naked man roared, howled like a dog. "We'll make you beg!"

The universe was a line, straight as any laser. There was nothing outside that corridor, nothing at all. The battle that raged beyond the hull might have been a story in some history book, a fiction in some holograph opera. For me, there was only that nightmarish corridor, that expanse of polished steel.

But outside . . . outside it was different. The shards of shattered moons hurtled round the planet faster than any shot, fragments spreading over Danu's orbits until they formed a killing swarm, a storm of stone and twisted metal. These impacted still more Cielcin vessels, or else broke against their shields, producing a kind of chain reaction that forced those worldships that could to retreat to higher and higher orbits, or to break orbit entirely. They rained fire back at us, hurling bombs like thunderbolts.

Demiurge's countless guns replied, intercepting each weapon with machine-assisted accuracy.

Still, our fleet was overwhelmed. *Demiurge's* arrival, the destruction of so many Cielcin moons, had turned Danu's orbit into a killing box, and Lin and Kull were trapped in it, their only means of escape the jump beyond light. Beneath them, Danu shuddered in an ecstasy of torment, her stone turned to clay by tidal stress, her body rocked by the impact of debris.

It was Doomsday.

But for the Cielcin, too. Their feast had turned to famine, their triumph to a rout. The warp engines of their mighty ships required hours and days to reach readiness—the translation of so much mass simply demanded more than our ships required. In such situations, battles with the Pale devolved into a kind of chase, with the worldship pushing for relativistic velocities, streaking away from the planet in an effort to outrun the guns of man while they bought time. The longer such a chase went on, the nearer the Cielcin moon got to lightspeed, the fewer weapons could overtake them. Eventually, they would be safe from our missiles, our bombs, from MAG cannonry and even antimatter torpedoes. From everything short of light itself . . .

Light, and *Darklight*.

The dark energy beam outstripped light with ease, accelerating its tunnel of spacetime clean through the retreating Cielcin ships. One by one, those moons turned to brief suns, kindled by darkness, not light.

For twenty thousand years, the weapons of the Mericanii had been hidden, concealed first in the vaults of Vorgossos, later aboard *Demiurge*. They were unveiled on that day, revealed to the eyes of the Watchers. That was why Ushara bent her will upon *Demiurge*, why she set our own people against us.

For in the deeps of time, man, the child of their maker, themselves fashioned minds not in his own image, but in theirs. In that moment, that battle, Ushara understood, saw that man had sired creatures like herself. Weaker, lesser, prisoners to the crude matter of their birth, but far-seeing as

the Watchers themselves—and wise. And they had taught man the secrets of the universe, just as the Watchers had taught the Cielcin in their cradle.

They had given man weapons, and the means to destroy not only the Watchers' Pale servants, but the Watchers themselves. Seeing this, Ushara saw her peril, and the peril of all her kind.

Man had been handed the means to slay them, and I had been given the order.

Is it any wonder she wanted us destroyed?

"Lord Marlowe, sir, wait! I'm tired!" said William of Danu, shouting from just behind. Despite my efforts, the boy had flagged, so that even injured, I'd outpaced him. Turning back, I found the very hounds of hell still following us. Holden's men were fifty paces behind. We had gone a mile, perhaps two along *Demiurge's* length, advancing toward the bowsprit, toward the spin section and bridge where Orphan and Edouard directed the battle. Our direction of travel had not carried us any deeper into the ship.

"Get behind me!" I said, rekindling the sword still in my hand. Turning fully then, I walked back up the tramway, marked the approach of some thirty men. Their pursuit had spread them thin, spaced them out. It was not thirty men that pursued us, but two, then one, then four.

Seeing this, I smiled and—thinking of Ghoshal and his fellows—at once smoothed the expression away.

They had made a mistake.

Ushara had made a mistake.

I did not relish the thought of killing these men, but neither could I save them. The only way to save them known to me lay in a black city uncounted light-years away and countless trillion years to come. There was nothing for them but death, if fugue could not be managed—and fugue would prove no cure. Death would free them, commend them into the hands of him who waited at the end of time.

"Why doesn't she tear the ship apart?" Cassandra was beside me.

"Maybe she can't," I said. It was possible that the same design elements that precluded the Watchers from seeing inside the titanic vessel likewise prevented them from simply annihilating it. She had unmade at least one of

our frigates as we fled Danu, was doubtless destroying our ships in the battle outside even then. There was *something* there, something I did not understand, some element of alien and inhuman logic that had not quite slotted into place. I could feel the answer at the edge of my grasp. In the end, I said, “I don’t know.”

“You should take the children,” I said.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“They’re safer if you’re with them.”

“You’re safer if I’m with you.”

“Anaryan . . .”

“Abba.”

The first of Ushara’s slaves reached us—the naked man smeared with gore. He aimed a lance at us, fired wildly. His shot went wide, striking neither of our shields as he swung the bayonet to drive us apart.

I slashed the weapon in half, but did not slay him. I knew it must be done, knew the defense of the children called for it, but still I hesitated.

Cassandra did not. Her blade tore the man in half.

I looked at her, her teeth bared, her nostrils stretched, brows dragged down by fury and horror.

The next knot of pursuers halted, aimed their lances, their guns.

“There is no escape!” they cried, and laughed.

“Do you enjoy it?” asked one of their number—and it was Ushara’s voice. “All this killing?”

“Be silent!” I said.

Almost in answer, Cassandra rushed forward, closing the dozen or so paces between with Jaddian speed. I shouted after her, and followed.

On Earth so long ago, three champions—brothers all—stood for Rome against her enemies. Three fought three, and when two of the Romans were slain, the third ran, forcing his enemies to pursue. This separated his foes, so that at the last, the lone Roman champion turned and slew the first of his attackers in single combat, striking with desperate ferocity. The cornered serpent must strike, and we were cornered.

So I cannot fault Cassandra for what she did. If she waited, the enemy

would regroup, and we would be outnumbered. Just as the Roman champion *had* to turn and crush his foe with sudden violence lest the others catch up, we had to strike.

I rushed to join her, and together we cut the enemy down.

Somewhere above our heads, I heard the metallic thunder of metal on metal. The *uthras* were coming, had found us at last. Cassandra left three dead upon the tunnel floor and, sprinting, leaped back up the hall to reach the next knot of men before they closed. Ramanthanu had joined us, its body low, Olorin's blade in its hand—Otomno hard behind. A scream sounded from the hall behind—a child's scream. A girl's. I looked back, hoping for answers, but something huge and hideous fell from the roof above our head with a sound like a shot, struck the deck not five paces from me.

The *uthra* had curled itself into a fist, unfolded itself as it struck the deck. The metal hand gleamed, lifted its middle finger—the tip questing like the head of some charmed cobra. Seeing the enemy, it skittered toward them, more of its kind dropping from above. Undeterred by the newcomers, Cassandra howled, blade descending like the guillotine to tear another man in two.

She had left a trail of bodies in her wake. A dozen men or more.

As many remained.

But the *uthras* were ours. They swarmed over one another in their haste to aid us, and though Ushara's slaves fired upon them, five took the place of every one destroyed.

Black iron fingers closed about the ankles of every man, pulled him down, while huger hands pinned the strugglers to their place. The sound of gunfire died. The battle ended.

"Shall I destroy them, Master?" It was Orphan's voice, relayed by speakers in every metal hand.

"Father?" its other voice inquired. "Shall I?"

"Don't call me that," I said, watching the enemy struggle. "Hold them." How could they be saved? Distance would help. Separating them from Ushara, so that she lost them in the infinite night. Still, her shadow would

be on them, her fingerprints forever on their hearts. Turning to Holden's surviving men—my men—I said, “Stunners!”

I froze.

The men who had remained behind to guard the children were clustered on the floor of the hall, variously crouched or kneeling about something on the floor. Cassandra's face—blood-soaked—went white as milk beneath the red. One man held the sobbing Irene, turned her face away. Victor stood, silent, unmoving, his soul shuttered behind his eyes. I went to them, and clearing a path found what I expected.

Young William of Danu lay dying, a sucking hole in his chest. The shot—the shot that went wide, the shot that had missed Cassandra and myself by miles—had struck the brave young boy. The boy who so resembled my old and banished friend.

Not knowing what to say, I recalled a prayer Edouard had spoken, when he and I alone buried Valka's clone in the garden upon *Demiurge*.

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,” I prayed, muttering, “and let perpetual light shine upon them . . .” I could not recall the rest of it. It was not to Edouard's god I prayed, the godman of earthly fable, but to my own. To the One First, the One True.

The Quiet. The Hidden One. The Absolute.

“He's gone,” one of the soldiers said.

The instant he pronounced those words, young William smiled. Not the horrid leer of one of Ushara's slaves, nor any grimace of pain. There was peace on the poor boy's face. Had he seen it, with his mortal eyes? Beyond the spreading darkness?

The light in the black?

I knelt and closed his eyes.

Irene was yet sobbing, clinging to the soldier that had taken her aside. Victor and the other boy only stared, bereft. For a moment, those tears were the only sound in all creation—unless it were the clattering of the *uthras'* finger-feet.

Then another sound intruded, rough, wild, unwelcome.

Laughter.

The men—Ushara’s men—were laughing. All of them. Laughing.

Looking back, I saw their faces, all of them twisted—some at incredible angles—to better see me. I stood, snatching the stunner from the hand of the soldier nearest me. Checking the settings, I aimed it squarely into the face of the nearest puppet. Ball lightning struck him just between the eyes. He laughed. I shot him again. The laughter sharpened, spittle foaming on his lips and tongue. I fired. Laughter. Fired. Fired.

At last he fell still.

Still his brothers roared, chuckled, hooted.

“Still you think yourself a good man?”

The voice came from behind me, and the sound of it turned my blood to ice, to marble.

I did not dare turn. To turn was to make it real, to collapse what might have been a mistake, a trick my mind and ears had played on me . . . into terrible reality. But man cannot hide from what is. Reality is stronger than our hopes, our dreams . . . It is stronger even than our fears. And the truth . . . the truth is neither opinion nor its slave. Question it, deny it, hide from it all you like: The truth *is*, and it is terrible.

Cassandra was facing me. There was blood on her face, in her hair, and the light in her emerald eyes was like nothing human. And she was smiling. “Still you ask that idiot question?”

Ramanthanu tensed, sensing the malice new-kindled in the woman. My daughter. My girl.

We’d not gone far enough.

“Let her go,” I said, heart galloping in my chest. It took all my will to keep my voice from breaking as I swayed to face her. My daughter. My enemy.

“Let her go!” Ushara mocked. Cassandra’s face gleamed as if with fever. “You enjoy this. Admit it.” She advanced on me as she spoke, her movements awkward, jerky—as though she were a holograph played backward. About her, the soldiers shifted, uncertain what to do. “The fighting. The pain.”

“Let. Her. Go,” I said again.

“You think you matter, you little things.” She looked round at the others, smiling that terrible smile. “You think that *he* will save you? You’re wrong. You are *ours*, like *they* are ours.” Here she turned to look at Ramanthanu, who stood near at hand. “Even *you*. This . . . new flesh . . .” Cassandra—Ushara—surveyed me, licked her teeth. “. . . cannot protect you. Not from us.” She reached out with Cassandra’s one remaining hand, lifted a lock of my floating hair in her fingers. Her eyes were unfocused, fixed on something only corpses could see.

“Cassandra,” I said, “Anaryan, listen.”

For a moment, the green eyes twitched, seemed to find me. “Abba?”

“The music, Cassandra,” I said, holding her gaze. “Can you hear it?”

Only a smile answered me, terribly wide. Too wide.

“Abba!” she said, and laughed while she said it. “Abba. Abba. Abba! She is gone!”

“You lie!” My heart was in my mouth.

“We cannot lie!” Ushara said, but that—in itself—was a lie. They had lied when their illusion led me to believe Cassandra was dead. They had lied to the Enar, were lying to the Cielcin. “She is gone into the night that awaits you. Her hatred opened the door!”

“She is not yours, monster,” I said.

Cassandra’s head was thrown back, eyes rolling in her head. Her hand was on my chest, her lips parted, did not move as the words wormed their way from her throat. “If you want her . . . take her.” She thrust Cassandra’s tongue out obscenely. My stomach turned, my heart black with fury and despair.

“Take her!”

In my mind, I stood once more beside that rocking cradle, the birthplace of my god.

The rock was in my hand, raised, poised to strike.

My daughter had been my one link to this broken universe, this fallen cosmos, the one thing that mattered. If she were gone . . . truly gone . . .

Then I am alone . . .

And so I did the one thing I could—what any father would worthy of the

name.

I embraced my child, held her fast, weeping as though she were truly dead.

“She is *not yours*,” I said again, voice shaking.

She laughed—made her laugh. Around us, the soldiers raised their lances, and I shouted “Hold!”

Ramanthanu tensed, Olorin’s sword still in hand, ready.

It was Otomno that moved, shouting, “*Ba-Aeta-doh!*”

She still held her sword, had pressed the emitter against my own back.

Simple pressure was all it had taken. The depression of a single switch.

The blade sprang to life, passed straight through my heart on its way to hers.

I had not seen it coming, and so could not have stopped her—could never have stopped her. The two Cielcin seized her, too late to save her from herself . . . or save me. She crumpled as they dragged her back, sword tumbling from nerveless fingers. Blood ran red from her wounded heart, sheeting down her armor, soaking her robe. Her smile was like broken glass, her laughter burbling, terrible to hear.

I did not fall at once, could stop myself from falling—if only for a time. The taste of iron filled my mouth. I stood over her, my own heart breaking, my world shattered at my feet. I do not remember falling. Do not remember pain. All I remember are her eyes. The green of them. The triumph in them.

She is gone into the night that awaits you.

She is gone . . .

Gone . . .

My fingers touched my bloody chest, came away red. I was on my knees. When had I fallen? She was lying on the ground, her life’s blood a lake, an ocean about her precious self. My daughter. My girl. I heard her squalling as the natalists put her screaming into my arms, her little hands akimbo. I had wept then, for her sake, and my own, and for the mother she had never known.

Valka, I prayed, Valka, I failed you . . .

I was lying on the deck myself, my face mere inches from hers. Her eyes

were glass, unblinking, wide as moons and sightless. She was gone, had gone into the night, just as Ushara had said . . . and I was going after her . . .
. . . for a third and—I prayed—a final time.

Let it end. The words were like a knell. *Let it all end.*

Never. Never. Never . . .

That was when I saw it, by the fading light of my spirit. A single tear shone in one emerald eye, pooled against her nose where she lay. Ushara would not have wept, not then, not in her moment of triumph. Death had chased away her leering grin. It was Cassandra's own tear, I knew, and knew that hers was the face of one who had died *free*.

That last tear fell, its price higher than the price of all creation.

My last thought—as darkness took me—was that that we would both see her mother in the next moment. That Cassandra would see her for the first time.

Then countless hands bore me up . . . into darkness.

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CHAPTER 36

AFTERMATH

I DISCERNED A FAINT chiming, as of distant bells—high and clear as crystal. I was weightless, floating in an endless sea of deep water, neither cold nor warm. I was naked, and when I thrust out my hand, my fingers found glass. Faces peered in at me. I remember Neema's thin mustachios, Selene's tired eyes. Edouard sat in a chair not far, clutching his prayer beads. Orphan looked in, and Orphan looked in, twin faces terrible to behold, though the light in its eyes—the dark and the light—was kind.

There was a mask on my face. A breathing tube. A blood line ran from a shunt in my arm, and there were other lines besides.

I was in a tank, sliding in and out of consciousness.

Memory came but slowly. Of Danu. Our descent. The village with its *smygels*. Dorayaica. Miudanar. Ushara. The slaughter on the frigate. Upon *Demiurge*. Ghoshal's face.

Cassandra's.

I must have wept, but every tear was lost in the ocean that surrounded me, carried away by filters and by currents I could not feel.

She did not come to my window, and I knew that she was dead.

"Anaryan."

The old, familiar voice, bright-edged, razor-sharp.

There she was, standing just beyond the glass, her eyes downcast. She looked just as I remembered her, just as she ever had. Her braided hair hung over one shoulder. Her hands were on her hips. Her shirt left arms and midriff bare, so that her *saylash* shone like wet ink.

Valka.

I could not speak.

I felt a peace wash over me then and through me. A certainty. She

pressed her hand to the glass. I reached out and did the same, would have interlaced our fingers if I could. But the veil between us neither vanished nor dissolved, so that the face of my tank became the very curtain between life and death.

Still, I longed for her touch, her heart, a quiet word.

I got a smile, those darkly painted lips parting, curling.

“One last fight,” she said, and raised her eyes to mine.

They were Cassandra’s eyes.

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The dream broke. The chiming that had called me back to life remained—was only the faint beeping of medical instruments. I was still naked, lay beneath white coverlets. The blood line remained, attached to a tall staff at my left hand that plied its nostrum to my veins.

“Valka,” I said, almost a prayer. “Cassandra . . .”

Too sharply then I recalled the look upon her face at the last: her rolling eyes, her lolling tongue. The abandon and the lust—every deformation, every degradation.

Let it end.

But the Quiet’s theophany had spoken plain.

“You’re awake.”

The voice that sounded from my left was not the one I’d expected, nor either of the ones I longed to hear. It was a man’s voice. Rough. Terse. Tired.

“They said you’d be out from under soon. I wanted to be here.”

Bassander Lin was seated against the bulkhead to my left, his craggy face long-weary. Despite his words, their implication, he looked as one who had been there long. His typically oiled hair stood up in places, and his legionary greatcoat lay half over him, the broad, embroidered collar pulled almost to his chin. He’d clearly slept there. The thought stirred a strange affection in me. Lin and I had never really been friends . . .

. . . but war had made us brothers.

“Cassandra,” I managed to say again. My mouth was very dry. “Where . . . is she? Is she . . . ?” *Safe?*

“She’s here,” said Lin, face drawn and gray. The old soldier ran a hand over his face, smoothed his beard. “She’ll be all right, same as you. She got it worse. Blade sheared a bit more in her—poor girl. The . . . ship, I guess, repaired you both.”

A wave of relief, sweet and wretched, claimed me, and I shut my eyes. Tears uncounted streamed near-silent down my face. I shook, struggled to maintain a grip on my breathing.

“She was dead,” Lin said, sitting forward. “For about fifteen minutes, that . . . monster said. Before they got her in the tank. There was . . . damage.”

“Damage?” My blood ran cold.

“She’s still in the tank,” Lin said. “I’ve had my people look at the scans. Doctor Farra *thinks* she’ll make a full recovery, but it’s difficult to say. She got it worse than you. There was nothing left of her heart, and the left lung was cut to ribbons.” He paused. “What happened, Marlowe?”

I looked at him, long and hard.

Lin was a believer, though a believer—like Olorin, like Edouard, like the Emperor himself—in the wrong thing. Olorin and Edouard both believed in their old, dead gods. In Ahura Mazda and in Yahweh. The Emperor believed in the Absolute—it was so—but he knew him not, believed instead in the version of him generations of Imperial cultic tradition had built around his forebear. Lin was little different. He believed me the One Reborn, the God Emperor come again. He did not see me, not really, or grasp the distance between me and his vision of me.

“What of the Danuans?” I asked.

Lin swallowed. “The ones that survived? I had them interred. They’re aboard *Tempest*.”

“Good,” I said. “Is there water?” The strategos produced a drinking bulb. I sucked at it, let the water sit on my tongue a moment. Finally, I said, “It was the Watcher, Lin.”

Lin's face was unreadable.

"It seized their minds," I said.

"They were acting like . . . like Cielcin," Lin said. "I went down there myself, after we reached the rendezvous point. Your Agent Albé didn't have the manpower to . . . to . . ."

"To clean up," I said.

"I've seen . . . things," Lin said, touched his beard. "Terrible things, Marlowe—I know you have, as well. But this . . ." He looked like a man in desperate need of drink, of love, of long, forgetful sleep. "It's like they weren't human anymore."

I was silent then a long time. The only sound in the cosmos was the faint chiming of medical systems. "You saw them, then?" I asked. "They were still . . . ?"

"Deranged?"

"Possessed."

"Possessed . . ." It was Lin's turn to be silent. "Like with a daimon?"

"Exactly," I said.

"But we examined them," Lin said. "Every one of them. There's not a trace of machinery in any of them."

"I know," I said.

It was not the same medica, was maybe not even the same part of that almighty ship where Kharn Sagara had kept me while his machines knit my new arm all those years ago. But I found I could not look at the place without seeing his faces. The old dragon I'd first met, slumbering in his hoard. The two children. Suzuha and Ren. Calen Harendotes. The old witch. Nebet Hut. The golden giant that had nearly killed Cassandra.

The King with Ten Thousand Eyes.

The villain with a thousand faces.

"Kharn Sagara once told me that he believes all of this"—I gestured at the room—"that all of *us* are only the dreams of some machine. If that's so, it's easy to see *how* the thing was done."

Lin's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe that."

"Neither do I," I said. "But maybe it's like that. The Watchers have no

bodies, Lin. They *take* everything they have.”

When he spoke, it was as though his voice issued from the far end of a long, dark hall. “They slaughtered their own children, Marlowe. Gouged out their eyes. They *ate* each other.”

“I know.”

“And it wasn’t just the Danuans,” Lin said. “It was our own people.”

“I said *I know*.” Cassandra’s face floated in my mind. The fever in her eyes. The leering grin.

Lin’s hands were folded over the head of his cane then, and he’d pressed his forehead to them. Presently he looked up, dark eyes rising like moons above some distant horizon. “What happens when the Pale bring that . . . *thing* to a planet?”

“You know the answer to that,” I said. “And this is the least of their power.”

“We faced it. In battle.”

“You faced it?” I felt my brows contract.

“It appeared in orbit. Came out of nowhere. It was like a ship, Marlowe. More like a ship than a living thing. All these rings turning about a flaming heart. It tore into the fleet—I have no idea how we escaped. There was lightning. It was like . . .” He shook his head.

“Like what?”

“Like giant *hands*,” he said, he forced himself to say. “It broke our ships in its hands. Ours and the Tavrosi. Grand Admiral Kull is dead.”

I hung my head, allowed this news to wash over me and through me.

Lin was not finished speaking. “We got clear as soon as your party was away. We lost about a quarter of my fleet, and nearly all the Tavrosi ships—they were right up under that thing when it appeared in orbit. Only three of them got away.”

“Only three?” I said.

There had been dozens in the Tavrosi fleet.

“So many . . .” I said, eyes shut. “And for nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Lin said. “We destroyed nine of their worldships.”

Nine. I could hardly speak. It was a staggering figure. The largest single

victory mankind had ever struck against the Pale.

“Nine.” I cast my eyes up at the ceiling; the darkly ribbed vaults overhead showed floral patterns, black on black. “But Dharan-Tun wasn’t one of them.”

“It wasn’t there,” Lin said. “Latarran intelligence failed us.”

“I don’t think it did,” I said. “Dorayaica knew that I would come. This was a trap from the start.”

Lin sat up straight. “That’s not possible.”

“It was *there*, Lin,” I said. “On the planet. It came for me.”

“*That’s* not possible,” he said again, the shadow of the young officer I’d known moving in his face. I just looked at him, and the old man reasserted himself. “How?”

“The same way it came for me at Vorgossos,” I said, and made a vague gesture. “Across the void.”

Lin pressed his forehead to his hands—still folded on the head of his cane. Not looking up, he said, “If those *things* can appear anywhere, at any time . . . what’s to stop them reaching Gododdin before us?”

“Nothing,” I said, eyes returning to the ceiling. “Nothing at all.”

I had said the name of the planet to Cassandra, had said it in front of Dorayaica, hoping to bait the Prophet-King into an attack should our attack on Danu fail. Doubtless the Pale King had already bent its gaze upon Gododdin. Doubtless it and Miudanar and Ushara, too, had studied our forces, moved among our men.

Had I done the right thing?

I had chosen our field of battle, named the place.

It fell to Dorayaica to choose the hour.

“Did I die?” I asked.

“No,” Lin said. “You lost consciousness, but you held on, so Albé said. The blade just nicked your heart. You’re lucky.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” I said. It was the will of the Absolute.

“Maybe not,” Lin said.

“I want to see her.”

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It was a thing easier said than done. Even I—whose flesh had been restored to me by a messenger of the Absolute himself—could not simply shrug off what had been done to me. Dorayaica's blade had torn my bowels, and Cassandra's had broken my heart. It hurt to move, would hurt—the doctor said—for some days yet. The tank Orphan had ordered me placed in had restorative properties. Ten trillion little machines—each no larger than an animalcule—dwelt in the waters of the vat. These salved my wounds, permeated my flesh, infiltrated my every cell, and so set about the work of medicine. When Cassandra had been in the tanks before—after her bloody battle with Sentinel Commander Kedron—Orphan had assured me the machines were perfectly benign.

“They have no will as we,” the monster had said.

“They but obey their purpose.”

The centimanus assured me that the machines would die when their task was done, dissolve into their component proteins. But I could not shake the crawling horror of the thought.

I could hardly stand, and so a chair was found for me. With it came Neema, fussing as ever. “You really ought not to be out of bed so quickly, you know, *Domi*,” he said. “That . . . dreadful creature said you must rest some days yet. The young mistress is unconscious in any event. She will not know you are present.”

“It's not about her knowing I'm there,” I said. “It's about being there, Neema.”

“Unreasonable,” the little man sniffed. “And pray, how will I know if you hemorrhage? Your wounds have closed. All your bleeding is bound to be internal! I'm no physician!”

“I think you'll know,” I said tiredly, permitting myself to be led.

“But suppose I don't!” the Nemrutti said. “Suppose you're bleeding out even now, all because you wouldn't listen to sense!”

“I'm fine, Neema,” I said.

“Forgive me, *Domi*,” the other man said. “It's only . . . this is twice now

I almost lost you. You, and now the young mistress! Oh! The thought was—God of Fire! It was more than I could bear.”

I craned my neck to look up at the little man. The Jaddian homunculus smiled, his round face kind. Reaching up, I patted the old fellow on the hand. “I won’t tell Cassandra you were worried about her.”

“Pray don’t!” Neema said, and cursed. “Lord of Wisdom knows, I’d never hear the end of it.”

The surgical theater was black as the hall outside, but brightly lit. The auto-surgeon stood in the middle, its countless metal arms hanging down. Beyond it stood the tanks. There were five of them, all but the center one empty, lying on their backs, their canopies open, waiting to receive patients that might never come. They were on tracks, rotated to vertical when in use, so that the patients floated upright.

She floated in the center—dead, asleep—her hair a short, shadowy aureole about her head. She might have been slumbering in fugue, were it not for the mask she wore, the intubator and the oxygen lines that kept her breathing, watered, fed. There were other cords. Blood line, catheter.

“I’ve been in to sit with her,” Neema said. “Checked in on you as well, of course. I’d have been there when you woke up, only the strategos insisted he take a turn—would be that was when you’d wake up and all.” The servant tutted. “They say she can hear us, but they’re not sure how long it will be before she wakes up.”

I hardly heard him. There wasn’t anything in his words Lin and the doctors had not already told me.

I was remembering another tank, another time, another world.

The hands in that tank—and there had been two of them then—had been smaller than the end of my thumb, half-formed and already perfect. Only one cord had tethered her to the machine’s amnion, a purplish, bloody rope. Her little face, all forehead then, had turned and peered unseeing at me, and I had wept, and touched that glass.

“That . . . thing tried to take her from me, Neema,” I said, not taking my eyes from her.

“I wanted to . . . ask about that, *Domi*,” he said. “They said . . . the poor

girl, she . . . that it was her who did this thing?”

“Yes,” I said, fingers fidgeting with the magnets that held shut my robe.

“I can’t understand it,” he said. “Any of it. I heard what happened, with the villagers. That thing . . . the thing from Sabratha. It got the young mistress, too?”

“It did,” I said.

Cassandra’s hand drifted to her face, legs curling—like the child in my memory.

But she was not a child, had not been for a long time, not since the day she made the climb to the volcano’s edge and peered within. How easy it was for me—who recalled every day of her childhood—to forget what she was, what she had become. A woman grown, a warrior, and one who had suffered grievously . . .

. . . suffered for my sake.

“I should not have brought her,” I said, not taking my eyes from her sleeping form. I could not stop seeing her face, could not stop seeing Ushara *under* her face. “I should not have brought either of you, Neema. Forgive me.”

The little man tutted, thumped the back of my chair. “You say this thing as though you might have stopped her—or me. I’d have packed myself in your luggage, sir, and the girl would have clung to the hull of your ship and breathed vacuum before she allowed herself to be left behind.”

“That’s your programming talking,” I said. He was Nemrutti. A homunculus. “You’re bred for loyalty.”

Neema flinched. “That may be, *Domi*,” he said. He disliked being reminded. “But I may war with my nature like any other man. I’ll not say a word to her—she’s a hideous piece of work, the young miss is—but I love you both. And love is a choice.”

“I have not found it so,” I said.

“That is only because you make up your mind faster than you can think, begging your pardon, sir.”

I laughed—and laughing felt a piece of my soul break in reverse, like

the stones of Annica falling up and into place. “You see right through me, don’t you, Neema?”

“You Marlowes are simple creatures,” he said.

“Maybe so,” I said, still toying with the magnets.

My daughter drifted dreamless in the dimly lighted tube. So like her mother she was. Those high cheekbones, that sloping nose. I marked the signs of war on her, the cursemarks of Ever-Fleeting Time. Gone was her long and flowing hair, gone her left hand and arm, and the neat, white scar upon her breast would forever speak the death that she had known.

I smiled sadly. “She’s grown so much . . .”

Her blade slashed the air before me, caught the Prophet’s sword.

A miracle.

“You were always the last to notice.”

I had nothing to say to that, felt the scar on my own chest—just like her own. My wounded heart, my wounded side. Fingers still tracing the scar above my heart, I said, “Neema?”

“*Domi?*”

“If something happens to me. Promise me you’ll stay with her,” I said. “She’s never been alone.”

“Neither have you been, sir,” Neema said. “I pray, by Atash, you will never be.” He lay a dry hand on my shoulder.

Cassandra floated above us both, half a ghost.

“*Domi*, a thought?”

“Yes, Neema?”

“If the young mistress awakens . . . if that thing . . . if it’s still *in* her?”

“I know,” I said. “I know.”

Bassander Lin had told me that the Danuans and our soldiers who had been taken by Ushara’s will showed symptoms of her possession up until the moment they were sealed in fugue. Many had fought violently against detainment, and a number had been shot and killed. The jump to warp had not freed them, just as Gaizka’s flight from Sabratha had not freed me. The lot of them would bear the marks of Ushara’s fingers on their minds all the days of their lives. The only cure I knew for their affliction lay uncounted

trillions of years into our future, when the last sun in all creation flickered and went out.

Ragama, I prayed, if you can hear me. Help her, please. Help these people, as you helped me.

But the Quiet's messenger was as silent as his lord.

I was close enough to touch the glass, and as I had so long ago—when the Jaddian natalists had presented Cassandra's glass womb for my inspection—I reached out and pressed my palm against the surface. Looking up into her face—so peaceful it was, so near death—I asked, “Can she hear me, do you know?”

“I can't read these things,” Neema said, wagging his hand at the instrument panels. “Best to assume she can, yes?”

The chair beneath me rocked as I leaned upon the arm, base nearly scratching the floor. Neema lurched to push me back into my seat, but I waved him down. “I can stand, damn you!”

Neema pivoted, instead helped me to rise. Bare feet found frigid steel, and Kharn's black robe—embroidered with golden dragons—fell about my ankles.

“Anaryan,” I said, and once more put a hand on the glass. “Cassandra, dear girl. If you can hear me, I—” I was struck suddenly, by the thought that it might not be *Cassandra* that heard me at all, then by the notion—if it was not Cassandra—that Ushara might yet be capable of great horror, even then. What could I say? “I love you, daughter. I love you.”

My legs were shaking. My knees failed, and poor Neema had to catch me. My blood hammered in my ears.

“Leave us,” I said, and hung my head to hide my tears.

“But, *Domi!*”

“Please, Neema! For once, do not argue. The machines will save me if there is some problem.” I looked up and back at him. “You can wait outside, if you like. I want to be alone with my daughter.” When the man hesitated, I raised my voice. “Now!”

Neema bowed, withdrew on slippered feet.

Silence. Darkness. Cold.

“I saw your mother,” I said, hoping she would remember. It was easier to tell her, now I could *only* hope, “while I was in the tank beside you. *He* sent her. The Quiet sent her to . . . to tell us to keep fighting. To tell me.” I looked away, no longer comfortable with the silence. The cold. “She called me *Anaryan*—did I ever tell you that? That it was my name before it was yours? She gave it me. Her backward Imperial. I wanted you to have it. Wanted you to have . . . something of hers.” I smiled. “You have her eyes, too. I never knew that. The ones she had were gold—but they weren’t hers. They were implants. Her right eyes and yours . . . they’re the same.” I was crying softly then, but smiling, and reached out once more to touch the glass. “I am sorry, dear girl. For everything. For all of it.”

She twitched in her sleep, floated a little higher in the tank.

Her life had been so hard, her burden never light—because of me, because she was my daughter. It would only grow heavier, harder. They would hunt her, as they had hunted me. The Empire. The Chantry. For who she was. For what she was.

“But I know what I have to do now.”

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CHAPTER 37

THE RED WOMAN AND THE BLUE

NEEMA LEFT ME ALONE after returning me to the medica, saying I should have my rest. But in my altered state, I could not sleep, and so lay abed dreaming, forever conscious of my surroundings.

The Quiet had commanded me to slay the Cielcin. That was what the visions meant, had meant from the very start. The tide of light washing them away, that wave of cleansing fire. I had hidden from it, run from it, tried everything I could. I had tried peace—with Aranata Otiolo, and there been defeated by Cielcin and by human nature alike. I had tried endless war, and battle after battle. For three hundred years and more I'd tried it, and earned only a holocaust, the bloody offering of all my men on that altar to Miudanar in the black desert of Akterumu. I had even tried defeat, and two hundred years of exile had ended with Edouard Albé at my front door.

Now I had tried my own way, had tried to strike the head from the serpent instead of doing what I was told to do.

If the Quiet truly was the author of the cosmos, the architect of all things, and if he had ordered me to do a thing, to play my part in his story . . . who was I to change my lines?

I had the means. We had the arsenal.

A knock sounded at the door.

It opened.

I had expected to find Edouard Albé there, A2 with the full report, the full debrief, the full account of the Battle of Danu, our retreat, the bloody aftermath of Ushara's attack upon our ships . . .

But it was Selene, her slave-knight, Sir Verus, silently in train.

The princess took a careful step over the threshold, her hands clasped nervously before her. She looked so unlike herself, dressed as she was in

boots and trousers, in a red tunic and white bolero, that jeweled shield-belt of linked gold coins about her slender waist.

“My lord?”

“Princess.” I sat up with only a small measure of difficulty. Selene made to start toward me.

One hand outstretched, she said, “Please, don’t—”

Verus took up his post just inside the door, one hand forever on the hilt of his sword.

Nodding weakly, I slumped back against the pillows.

“Strategos Lin told me you were awake,” she said, advancing with mincing steps. “You’ve been to see your daughter?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And they’ve no notion when she will awake?”

“I don’t think they know *if* she’ll awake,” I said, words escaping before I could swallow their meaning. “She was dead, Princess. For fifteen minutes. Fifteen *minutes*. What took them so long?”

“I’m not sure,” Selene said. “I was confined to quarters, just Verus and myself. But I think the trams were down. Something about trying to . . . contain the rioters.”

The rioters . . . Had she not been told? Had Lin and Albé striven to isolate her, to *insulate* her, from the horrors that had played out on the black ships that had carried the poor, doomed redlings out of Danu?

“They got you both to medica as quickly as they could. You were still holding on, but Cassandra . . .” She shook her head, stood over me, a look of worry and terrible grief upon her lovely face. “I think if we were on any other ship, she . . .”

“I know,” I said, acutely conscious of the black silk robe I then wore—as I was forever conscious of its original owner.

“What happened down there?” she asked. “No one seems to really know.”

That was no surprise. Of the team that had gone down to the surface, only Cassandra and myself had experienced the full terror of what had

passed. Annaz and poor Holden and the rest had been busy tending to Argo's people.

"We were attacked," I said. "Dorayaica came for me itself."

"Dorayaica?" The princess's face was white as any ghost's. "The Prophet?"

"What's left of it," I said, and halted. How could I explain what Dorayaica had become? Selene knew but little of the true conflict, little of the Watchers and the lord they had denied. "The creature in Dorayaica can see across space, you know? It found me."

"Dorayaica was . . . *on* Danu?"

"Only for a few moments," I said. "It crossed the light-years. Came for me. Tried to kill me." In truth, I think the Watchers had meant for me to kill myself, or at least to *let* myself be killed in my despair. Perhaps they thought such a death might sever the link that bound me to their enemy. Perhaps they were right. "Cassandra and I fought it off—that's how I was wounded. But the other Watcher came, attacked our ships. So we made the jump to warp."

"The other Watcher . . ." Selene said, her voice very far away. "Ushara."

"That's right," I said. "It was she who followed us up here. To *Demiurge*. It was she who drove the men to madness."

"Madness . . ." She shuddered.

Sitting up as best I could, I looked up into Selene's lovely face. Seldom had I seen her face so unpainted, without even the touch of charcoal about her eyes. Tired shadows hung there instead, each a testament to sleepless nights and long care.

"Will you sit, princess?" I asked.

Selene nodded, swallowed, found a seat for herself.

"You'll forgive me for not kneeling," I said, making her laugh.

She clasped my hand. I felt the gentle bite of her many rings.

"The men who were with you . . . said it was Cassandra who stabbed you," Selene said. "Who stabbed the both of you."

I looked Selene in the face, smiled tightly. Selene licked her lips, looked away. "Lin and Albé tried to hide it from me. The worst of it. They weren't

very good at it . . .” Her voice tapered off. “I saw the cleanup. Talked to some of the . . . the survivors. The children . . . the ones you saved.” There were tears in those emerald eyes. “How are we to fight such creatures, when they turn our own people against us?”

“I thought I could kill them both. Miudanar—Dorayaica, I mean—and Ushara. The Watchers. I tried to bait them. To use myself as bait. There is a weapon, one of the Mericanii arsenal. It can annihilate matter and energy both. I wanted to draw them to myself, and . . .”

Selene released my hand. “That was your plan? Kill yourself?”

I had not expected ever to hear such venom on her lips. Startled, I looked up into her face, found her eyes—her emerald eyes—hard and glaring, bright with furious tears.

“A pawn sacrifice,” I said, my tired answer.

“A pawn sacrifice?” She almost sneered. “A pawn sacrifice! Hadrian Marlowe! This isn’t chess.”

Surprise blunted my response. “If it had worked—”

“You’d be dead!”

“And so would they!” I said. “My life for theirs? It’d pay that price gladly.”

“I would not!” Selene said. “Cassandra would not! Did you think about that?”

I felt my own eyes grow hard, narrow. “What do you think stopped me?”

Her eyes were still narrow. “Cassandra?”

“I ordered her away,” I said. “But she wouldn’t listen. She came back for me.”

“Then I thank Mother Earth for her.”

Mother Earth . . . I thought, thinking of Samek. “They will follow us to Gododdin, Selene,” I said. “That’s where we’ll make our stand. Our last stand, most likely. Whatever happens there . . .”

“They’re still not right,” Selene said. “The refugees. The men who . . . changed. They stopped fighting, but . . .”

“But they’re not themselves.”

A cold bark of laughter left the princess. “No,” she said, and hugged

herself. “No, they’re not.”

“You said Lin had them all packed in fugue.”

She nodded, swallowed, chafed her arms. “Yes. They didn’t cooperate. I know they had to shoot a few of them. I—”

I shut my eyes, felt the tears fall free.

“I’m sorry, Selene,” I said. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“And where should I be?” she asked. “Tell me that.”

I took her point.

“Will Cassandra be all right?” she asked. “If she comes out of it? Will that thing still be . . . in her?”

“It’s not in her,” I said, and said it firmly. “It’s not in any of them anymore. But there’s not a one of them that doesn’t bear her mark.” I was quiet then. We both were. “When I . . . came back to Forum—the first time, I mean—I had her shadow on me. It went away when I—” I stopped short. “When I came back.”

I had not told her of Ragama, of my trial and judgement, of the Judicator’s blazing sword and burning hands. “I was . . . not all myself, but enough myself, I think.”

Selene’s face was one of horror. “It was . . . in you?”

“It wanted to make me like Dorayaica,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Its bride.”

Selene’s face darkened. “Its what?”

“The Watchers don’t have physical form,” I said. “They’re parasites. Dorayaica’s god is using it to draw itself more fully into our world. To birth itself, if you like.”

Birth itself . . . Selene’s lips moved, and another nervous spasm shook her.

“The Watcher is both parent and child,” I said. “Father and son.”

“And you refused her?” she asked. “Ushara?”

“She tried to force me,” I said. “She got her claws in me the first time.”

Selene sat up straighter. “The first time?”

“On Sabratha.”

Selene's shoulders shook.

"Princess?" I laid my hand on hers. "Selene? What's wrong?"

"He told me you were dead," she said, words breathless, tripping over one another. "He wanted me to—tried to make me kill myself." Her fingers turned, tightened on mine. Her whole body shook. "I was in my cabin. Verus was outside. I had the knife, I—" Her other hand went to her neck. "He wanted you to find me like that. After."

I sat fully upright then, heart hammering in my mouth. I was still weak. So weak. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and the hand that held hers trembled. "Who told you?" I asked. "When—"

"I thought he was you at first," she said. "I thought it was a dream. He looked just like you!" She pressed her lips together. "But he kissed me. He kissed me, and I knew it wasn't you. I pushed him away. He told me . . . he told me you were dead."

My own eyes closed very slowly.

"It was Ushara," I said. "She came to you, too."

Selene shook her head. "It was a man. You said—"

"It was Ushara," I said again.

Had the Judicator himself not called Ushara *brother*?

"I can't stop thinking about it," she said, hand returning to her neck. "The ship was shaking all around us. I had the knife in my hand . . ."

"What stopped you?" I felt a fool for lying there, though my heart had been torn, was not yet fully healed.

"What?" Selene's hand went to her coiling hair. She hesitated. Was she blushing? "I . . . you'll think I'm mad."

It was my turn to laugh shortly. "Try me."

"I . . . I prayed. To Mother Earth, I mean. Prayed that you were safe. That it was all a dream. Hadrian, I—I know you don't believe in the Mother, but she . . . saved me." I was too tired to object, could feel the blood pounding in my temples. "She was . . . so beautiful, Hadrian. Earth herself. Her hair was black. Black, like yours. We have this painting of her, back home. She looked just like it. She was dressed in blue. Like the sea. And her eyes! They were blue, too—green, maybe. She didn't say a word."

She just smiled at me, and put her hand on mine. Then she looked at *him*, and he vanished.”

I lay there, silent.

“Are you all right?” Selene asked.

“I just need rest,” I said.

I’d no notion what to tell her. How could I—of all people—gainsay what she had seen? And yet I knew that Mother Earth could not have come to her. Mother Earth was a fiction, the icon of a planet painted up by priests whose masters believed no word of what they taught.

“You don’t believe me.”

“No,” I said, reaching for her hand. “It’s not that, it’s . . .” I found her knee instead. “I don’t think it was your Mother Earth at all.”

“What, then?”

“One of the Watchers,” I said, thinking of Ragama. “One still true to the Absolute.”

Selene had no response to that, slowly brought her hands to cover mine. “I see . . .”

“It didn’t say anything?” I asked. “. . . she didn’t?”

Selene shook her head. “She just smiled at me. Took the knife out of my hand. Then she was gone. And the other with her. What does it mean?”

A warmth and peace stole through me then, and I felt my heart slow its violent tattoo. “I think it means we’re not alone in this.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” Selene said. “About her, about *him*.” Her eyes were on the floor between her booted feet. “He showed me what will happen, if the Cielcin win. He showed me my city burning. I saw the Royal Woods fall out of the sky. The palace burning. And my sisters . . . the things they did to my sisters. And the children. Even the little children, I—”

“I’ve seen it, too.”

Her fingers tightened on mine. “They look like us,” she said. “The peasants. The ones you brought from Danu. They look like my family.”

“I think they *are* your family,” I said. “Some bastard branch.”

Selene accepted this with a swallow and a bob of her head. “There was a girl. She was dead in the hold. Albé’s men said the others killed her. She

looked just like my Drusilla. She's Father's youngest . . . or was when I left home. There could well be another by now. I don't even know. I should know, shouldn't I?"

"Selene!"

She jerked upright. "Sorry," she said. "I'm sorry, I . . . how can we fight these things? They can burn our fleets, drive men mad, be everywhere at once!"

"Selene!"

She was scared. Losing control.

"Will Cassandra be all right?" she asked. "Or will he—*it*—still be . . . in her?"

I took my hand from her knee. Realized I had left it there for far too long. I stared down at my feet, found—abruptly—that I could no longer look the princess in the face. "I don't know."

"Why isn't he in me?" she asked.

I thought about it a moment, listening to the faint chime of the monitors, the mute drone of the room's ventilation. "When I was . . . after I left you on Forum," I began, referring to the occasion of my demise, "I met one of their kind. One that still served the Quiet. Ragama. Ragama healed me, took what remained of Ushara's . . . shadow from my mind. Maybe the blue-eyed woman healed you in the same way."

"But . . . why?" Selene asked. I could see the pain in her face.

"I don't know," I said. "My guess is that you've some part to play yet in all this."

Old visions played like shadows against the hollow recesses of my mind. I saw myself seated on the throne of Empire, draped in leopard skins, Selene at my feet. I had always thought of the vision as a failure. It was a future I'd never wanted. A future without Valka. A future of rule, a future I had believed passed. But I had believed that I'd escaped the net of Akterumu, only to be caught in its web. Was that, too, to be my future?

"What part?" she asked. "I am no hero. No warrior."

"I don't know," I said. "I am no prophet."

"Why would she save me?" Selene asked. "And not the others? Not

Cassandra?”

“I don’t know that, either,” I said. “Maybe your prayers were answered, just not by Mother Earth.”

Selene was silent then.

“Princess,” I said at last. “I don’t have every answer. But I am glad you are all right.” Her smile blossomed, faltered. She was not looking at me. “I cannot tell you why Ushara came to you, or why you were spared . . . but I do know that you faced one of the powers of our universe and you survived. Take heart from that.”

“I almost did it,” she said, hand on her neck once more. “If she hadn’t stopped me. I would have . . . I—”

“I know,” I said. “They wanted me to kill myself as well.”

“I thought they wanted you alive.”

“I think they want a lot of things,” I said. “And I think they each want different things. They aren’t of a mind, the two of them.” I had ruminated on this very thought long and hard since Neema left me there. “Ushara . . . offered me the chance to kill Dorayaica.”

Selene’s eyes snapped to mine. “He offered me the same,” she said. “That was why he showed me the future, the Eternal City burning. He wanted me to . . .” Her hands squirmed. “To . . . give myself to him. In return he would . . . conquer. I would be Father’s heir, and he . . .”

“Would sit the throne beside you,” I said. “I’ve seen it, too.”

Selene broke, a sob escaping her, and she hid her face in her hands, shoulders shaking.

I restored my hand to her knee. “It is all right,” I said. “You’re all right.”

Her eyes were red when she looked at me, her face honest and clean, her smile a wax seal over grief. “I dreamt so long . . .” she said, “so long . . . I wanted to travel with you. I was so jealous of Alexander. My brothers, my suitors . . . the lords. I wanted *you*. From the moment I saw you.”

“I know,” I said. “But *that* was the dream, Selene.”

A hollow laugh escaped her. “It’s a nightmare,” she said, and turned in her seat to face me, “and neither one of us is ever getting up.” She stood then, taking her hand in mine, and, tucking one shining strand of burning

hair behind her ear, she stooped, and planted a brief, gentle kiss upon my mouth.

I must have said something.

What that something was, I can no longer recall.

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CHAPTER 38

BURIAL AT SEA

THE BODIES LAY IN neat rows, each wrapped in black, bagged and ready. We had stopped—some many hundred light-years out from Danu—to dispose of the bodies in the old way. They were to be ejected into the void, that each might be in the deep bosom of the star-ocean buried. I had forbidden Lin's chaplain—a Chantry priest called Celsus—from giving the benediction. Lin objected, ever the faithful son of Earth, but Albé and nearly all that remained of the Sabrathans and the men of HAPSIS—those who had survived Kedron's attack upon *Demiurge*—had supported me. And so it fell to me to offer something akin to prayers for the souls and memory of the men and women who had died at Danu.

That was just as well. The remaining Tavrosi, under the command of one Vanna Kvaran Vhad Naddodd, would offer no sacrifices to Mother Earth, or wish sacrifices offered in the name of their dead. Such things were of the *right hand*, they would say, and against their *Mux Sae*.

But the Tavrosi dead—though they numbered in the thousands—accounted for fewer than ten of the bodies in the hold. The rest had died with their ships, wired into their *thathing* networks. The few that lay in bags upon the floor had died after the battle, of injuries incurred in the final retreat.

Nearly a week had passed since I awoke from that place near death, and I was strong enough then to stand upon my own two feet. I had passed most of the intervening time in the ship's high garden, seated in my float-chair by the reflecting pool, watching the whorls and eddies of warped space shining on the water. Neema stood by me, or Edouard, or Lin, and many hours were passed in conversation. I told none of them what had passed between Selene and myself, having gathered that she had herself said nothing.

The princess sat with me herself a time or two, neither one of us acknowledging the shadow—the dream—that lay between us. Valka's shade lay nearby, her memory safe beneath a carpet of grass and violet lilies, while all about the *uthras* crawled, fingers forever going about their work.

And Cassandra slept the sleep of the dead.

I was with her, whenever I was not in the garden, sat vigil by her side though the sleepless watches of the night. I told her stories, the stories I'd told her when she was a girl, when she'd lie awake too late—and I would indulge her—telling tales of far-off times and places. Other worlds.

"One more, Abba," she would say. "Just one more!"

I told her of Kasia Soulier. Of Cyrus and Amana. Of Simeon the Red.

She said nothing there and then. Nothing. Not a word, when I had so great a need for words with her. There was so much to talk about, so much I never said.

Never. Never. Never.

"Never again will we see their like," I said, and thumped the deck with Gibson's cane once, twice, three times for good and all.

At that signal, the doors of the hold were opened, and the air blew out, carrying with it a tide of bodies: Legion and Danuan and Tavrosi, each one bound in black, a small, bright lamp affixed, so that as they rushed into the night, it seemed a shower of sparks, of new suns—small and remote—danced across the darkness and were lost.

Standing beside me, Selene took my hand as—unheard by all but her—I muttered a prayer, one conjured on the spot, styled after the prayer Edouard had made to his dead god. "Receive your servants, Lord," I said, addressing the Quiet, the Absolute Himself, "bring them through this darkness to new light."

CHAPTER 39

ASTROPHAGE

IT HAD TAKEN THREE years to reach Danu, would take three years to return. Our stop to bury our dead among the stars had cost us a mere two days—long enough for the warp engines to turn over.

I would not enter fugue, though fugue alone offered me oblivion. I would not risk Cassandra waking whilst I slumbered, half-dead myself. If there was the barest chance that Ushara's shadow yet gripped her heart, she needed me. What is more, I knew this voyage would *truly* be my last. Danu I had intended for the site of my last stand, but Fate, chance, and hubris had conspired to deny me.

Gododdin would make my end. Would be the end.

And so I lingered, haunting *Demiurge* like a ghost. Those two days at anchor might have been our undoing. The whole time, while we made our preparations, I felt their xanthous eyes. Lidless, blazing, questing in the night. Only our smallness preserved us, and in that fact I saw a piece of the Absolute's design. Why make all that emptiness? Why create so vast an infinity in space? So much emptiness?

It was our shield, as it had been our shield in ancient days, when the Vaiartu burned the galaxy to cleanse it of life. They had missed Earth, missed many worlds, and so man was free to rise from the dust, to get up, and walk.

Free to challenge the very gods.

Those first weeks passed but slowly. I was still weak, but in the days following the funeral, I dragged myself into meetings with Albé, with Lin, with Captain Kvaran and the other high officers. There was much to discuss, much for them to understand. But for Edouard, none of the men had seen a Watcher before.

“The skeleton of every ship functions in part as a Faraday shield,” said Kvaran, a thin, white-faced fellow whose jewel-red eyes were surely false as Valka’s. His hair was the color of beaten gold, and his clan *saylash* wound fractal spirals up the left side of his neck and along his jaw. “’Tis some insulation against these *things*, surely.”

“But it’s not enough,” said Albé sharply. “Most ships are designed to minimize signal impedance for the sake of comms. *This* ship is designed to defend against their sight, and the one that attacked us could still make itself known as far in as the first tramway.”

We were seated at the same conference table where we had recounted the events at Vorgossos to Prince Olorin. Ketevan sat thereby, *Gadelica*’s captain, now that poor Ghoshal was gone. The Jaddians were absent, replaced by Lin and his subordinates. The solemn giant, Astor, ever Lin’s faithful shadow, sat at the strategos’s right hand, while about them sat a bevy of other captains. A few I recognized: Mattias Simonyi of the *Gran Squall*, and Captain Dayne of the *Thunderhead* had both been present at Ganelon. But there were new faces as well. Porras and Watts, Tyrrhenian, Lipari, and Jael. Then there were the Tavrosi. Vanna Kvaran had been appointed their first-among-equals, but Lin had suggested all three captains be brought in, seeing as they were so greatly reduced in number.

And Annaz was there, for his people, while Ramanthanu and Otomno stood guard at the door.

“What is it about this ship that makes it so special?” asked Captain Watts, tapping his stylus against the tabletop.

“In a word?” asked Albé, polishing his spectacles on a kerchief. “Geometry.”

“Geometry?”

Edouard flashed a look at me. “I have spent more time with the pilot than anyone here—save Lord Marlowe alone—trying to get my head around these issues. *Demiurge* was designed by Sagara’s daimon precisely to elude these creatures. It’s more than the Faraday shield effect produced by the superstructure. Think of how you might contour a vessel to minimize radar detection. The layout of the vessel itself obscures us.”

“Obscures us *how*?” asked Watts doggedly.

Young Albé tapped the table to change the projection, brandished his spectacles like a baton. “You see these outer corridors? The way they spiral? Corkscrew around the vessel?”

Watts inclined his head, while beside him, Lin’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s not just the walkable area, it’s the whole ship. The plumbing, the electrical systems—ventilation, the superstructure itself.” He was still pointing, tracing the contours of the internal structure he described with his glasses. “I think—and this isn’t quite right, call it an analogy—I think this makes it to where the ship is effectively transparent to their gaze.”

“But *how*?” asked Watts again.

Edouard could only shake his head.

“The Watchers exist in more than four dimensions,” I said. “They are *above* us, in a sense. *Demiurge*’s design effectively sets this ship at just the right angle to their dimension so as to appear *almost* invisible.”

“Like a sheet of paper seen edge-on,” said Edouard.

Watts shook his head, cursed, asked, “How then did one get on board?”

“Paper’s not invisible,” said Edouard. “And neither are stealth starcraft.”

This pronouncement left a cloud of uncertainty on the air, from which Kvaran’s voice broke like the lightning. “Then they can find us wherever we are.”

“Yes.” I watched as they began to comprehend the terror I had felt more sharply each day since I took a finger from Dorayaica’s stony hand.

“So it was just chance?” asked Kvaran, “that it got on board?”

“No.” I felt my head turn minutely side to side. “It was me.”

“You?” the three Tavrosi spoke in unison, a little *thatching* in themselves.

Lin and a few others of the Sollan contingent flinched.

“The Watchers are . . . drawn to me.” Not a one of them asked why. “They’re looking for me. Wherever I go, wherever I am. The one at Danu got close enough that my presence outweighed the benefit of our defenses.”

“Then you’re a liability,” Kvaran said.

“Why do you think it is I’ve confined myself to this ship for the last

thirty-odd years?” I snarled. “Why I’ve stayed hidden all these years? You think it was for fear of the Empire?”

The Tavrosi captain said nothing.

“Then there is no lesson to take from all this,” said Bassander Lin, eager to restore the flow of conversation. “Were we to begin building ships in the style of *Demiurge*, it would be decades—centuries—before such work could be completed.”

“And we only have *years*,” said Edouard, restoring his glasses to their place on his aquiline nose. “We will reach Gododdin in just under three. Assuming the Cielcin do not linger in Danu space, they could be on us in as little as two years after that.”

“And perhaps less,” said Lin, stroking his beard. “We cannot be certain where the rest of the fleet is even now.”

“They may be ahead of us,” said Captain Porras, seated at Watts’s right.

“There’s no way to be sure . . .” I said darkly. “They’re already in motion.”

Bassander Lin hammered the table with both his fists. “Are we to do nothing, then? Can we do nothing?” He spoke only to me. “I saw men—men who have stood together, fought together for years—turn on each other like dogs! I had to shoot five men for rape. My men. Good men. And you’re telling me there’s nothing we can do to stop it?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

I felt it then, for the first time in centuries. The old line of fire between us, a beam of burning lightning traced from eye to eye. “Don’t lie to me, Hadrian,” Bassander said. “I’ve seen you stop a titan with your bare hands. I’ve seen you kill with a word . . . You expect me to think there’s nothing you can do?”

“If there was,” I said, very softly, cognizant that all eyes there gathered fell on me then, “do you think my daughter would be where she is now?”

That knocked the wind from Bassander, and he crumpled back into his chair, a man old and tired of war.

“We have the Archontics,” I said, voice hushed.

Captain Kvaran and his compatriots turned as one to regard me, but only

one spoke. “With respect, Marlowe, lord, we tried your weapons. They were not enough. My people were nearly destroyed.” Her voice was so like Valka’s that I froze.

Edouard interjected. “Captain,” he said, “you have seen the barest part of our arsenal. We’ve weapons on board that make the *Darklight* and *Albedo* seem trifles.”

“Then why did you not use them?” Kvaran asked. “Admiral Kull is dead. Our fleet is devastated. We three alone remain with our people to sail back to our stars.”

“Because *to* use them,” Edouard replied, not missing his riposte, “would have meant the complete annihilation of Danu system.”

“Danu system *is* annihilated!” Kvaran said, standing to match the young Delian officer. “The Cielcin have annihilated it, and now you say we might have avenged it better, and spared my people the same fate?” he snarled. “Or did you want us destroyed?”

“That’s enough, Captain,” said Bassander Lin, voice soft once more.

Kvaran shook his head, disgust plain on his face. “You snakes. You play the long game. You would have us break our necks for you, so that when this fight is done you might swallow us whole.”

“I said *that’s enough*,” the strategos said.

“You beclown yourself, Captain,” said I, and leaned back in my seat. “Have a seat.” I went silent then, resolved to wait upon these men.

It was time.

“We failed on Danu,” I said. “It was my intention to draw the ire of the Watchers, to use myself as bait, a lure to trap them both.”

Kvaran had not resumed his seat, stood looking down on me, aghast, confused. Ushara had shredded his fleet, torn his ships apart with her bare hands.

But it was Captain Watts who spoke. “You . . . lured those things?” he asked, leaning forward, brows knit. “How?”

“We orbited one of the Archontic weapons,” I said, not precisely answering his question. “*Voidmaker*. It was my intention to remain on the planet after our ships won clear, to keep the creatures there long enough for

the weapon to fire.” I watched the faces of the others present as they worked through the implications of my words. “*Voidmaker* generates a field that annihilates matter and energy within its effective radius.”

“It violates the laws of conservation?” asked Watts incredulous. “But that’s impossible!”

“It’s not impossible,” I said sharply. “But *how* it’s possible is quite beyond me. It may be beyond all mankind.”

“You’ve tested this weapon?” Kvaran asked.

We had. In the long years of our exile in Annica system. We had deployed *Voidmaker* against asteroids in-system, destroyed atoms whose quarks had endured since the uttermost foundation of time.

“Why did you not deploy it?” asked one of the Tavrosi women, voice cool.

“We never got a clean shot,” I said, thinking of Cassandra. “By the time the refugees won free, it was too late.”

“Why weren’t we told?” Kvaran asked.

“Because I wasn’t sure if the Watchers would even come,” I said, and knowing I needed to maintain the offensive, bowled forward. “We are well over the horizon here, Captain. We are dealing with forces far beyond us.”

“That isn’t a good answer,” Kvaran said.

“Nevertheless,” said I, “it is the truth.” I laid a hand flat against the tabletop before me, stared at the back of it, the veins standing there, lapis under marble. “I am sorry for the fate of your fleet, Captain. Sathha Kull was no friend of mine, but that he volunteered for this expedition speaks to his courage, and to the courage of all your people. Your sacrifice will be remembered.”

Kvaran was still on his feet as he said, “’Tis small consolation for the dead.”

I stared up at the man opposite me, this man who had lost nigh all his countrymen—who had indeed lost part of himself, for in the *thathing* unity, a part of him had been Sathha Kull, had been every one of his companions, just as a part of him was in the two captains seated at his either side even then. Indeed, some piece of the *Utnamnavi* lived yet in the three captains.

Memories of the Tavrosi dead—knowing they were dead—cried out in horror for justice.

I could see the ghosts dancing in their eyes.

“Have a seat, Captain,” I said again, gesturing.

Kvaran did not sit, nor did his twin companions. He raised his chin—and the women did as well, moving just barely out of step with one another. I felt a shiver. The angle of each head, the tightness in each jaw—it was the same. “You led us to slaughter,” he said. “My brothers and sisters went to war with that *thing*, and you didn’t pull the trigger?” Kvaran shook his head. “You *didn’t get a clean shot*? What does that mean?”

I thought about Cassandra, her dreaming face, her face disfigured by Ushara’s touch. Should I have done it, after all? Sacrificed her? Killed her along with myself? I looked at Vanna Kvaran, at his two companions.

“You know what that thing did to the people on this ship,” Kvaran said, gesturing at the other captains. He put his hand on his chest—they all did, all spoke in synchrony, “Can you imagine what it did to *us*? What it was like sharing a mind with . . .” They broke off. All three turned their heads. When Kvaran spoke again, he spoke alone. “If you’re telling me you could have stopped it . . .”

“I said *have a seat*, Captain,” I said, voice my father’s icy cold. “Lord Kull’s life will be avenged.”

“*Lord Kull*.” Kvaran let out a hissing sound, looked to his fellow demarchists. “Do you know how many we lost?” He did not wait for a reply. “Nine thousand, six hundred forty-nine.”

“Of ten thousand,” said one of the other two. “Our whole navy.”

Bassander Lin came to my rescue. “Their sacrifice will not be forgotten,” he said, arms crossed.

“Their *sacrifice*,” said Vanna Kvaran, “was for nothing. Nothing but your worthless hides.”

“We destroyed more of their ships at Danu than in any single engagement in the entire history of the war!” Lin’s voice smoldered with partly controlled rage. “Nine,” he said. “*Nine*. Those *nine* ships will not go on to Gododdin, or Forum, or to any of your own worlds! It will take the

Pale *hundreds* of years to replace those ships. And we destroyed them in hours. That is not nothing, Captain, that—”

I raised a hand. “Enough, Lin,” I said, looking at Vanna Kvaran. “He’s right.”

“My Lord,” Lin looked surprised, began to protest, “you can’t seriously —”

“Captain Kvaran,” I said, “your people have given enough.”

For a moment, I thought the man might spit at me, so venomous was his expression as he drew himself up to his full height. Then he collapsed, diminished, became only a man, another human being crushed by torment and by loss. What guilt he must have felt, what pain—to have felt the deaths of so many of his kindred across their shared experiences.

He knew what death *felt like*. What it meant.

“I can hear no more of this,” he said, turning to his companions. “We will take our leave.”

I did not fight him. Did not argue. Did not beg.

I stood, offered him my hand. Not as a lord, but as a soldier. As a man.

Kvaran looked as if I’d stabbed him.

Some silent word must have passed between him and the two women. One lay a hand upon his shoulder, dissuading. He made a hollow sound: disgust, condescension.

He left without another word, his companions beside him.

They left discomfort in their wake. Uncertainty.

Hurt.

We had all suffered at Danu.

Ought we not to have gone to the surface? Saved Argo and his people?

The Tavrosi had paid three for every one we had saved. So many . . . for so few.

“Let them go,” I said, the whole of the council shifting nervously about me.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

It fell to me to pick up the shattered pieces of the council.

“The enemy is behind us,” I said at last, looking to Edouard. “By a year

at least—and perhaps a little more. Therein lies our best chance. Dorayaica knows the fleet has massed at Gododdin. It will guess that the Emperor is there, and that we are returning there.”

The Cielcin would hurl the greatest part of their strength against us, seeking one final, decisive victory. If the Pale could break our fleet, it would mean the end of human resistance. Never again would mankind be able to muster such a fleet. Battleships like *Tamerlane*, like *Huntsman* and *Aurora*, required centuries to build. The Cielcin would not allow us centuries. Not ever again.

Our future would be to live as rats, running from our hunters until the end of time.

“We have some time to prepare,” I said, working to recover my footing in the wake of Kvaran’s departure.

“Against those *things*?” Watts asked. “Lord Marlowe, you’ve said yourself, there is nothing we can do. We have no defenses.”

I raised a hand to silence the other man. “It is not of defense that I speak, Captain, but of offense.” I looked at Edouard again. The man had hated the plan when first I’d given it voice, had railed against it as violently—more violently—than he had when I announced my intention to deploy the *Darklight* at Danu. “The weapons we deployed at Danu are among the weakest in the arsenal. There are those capable of . . . much more.”

“How much more?” asked Bassander Lin.

I hadn’t told him.

“We have aboard this ship a weapon capable of destroying a sun,” I said.

“That’s impossible!” Watts said, laughing nervously, looking round as if he expected to find Lin and Porras smiling at him. “The energy levels required . . . it can’t be done!”

Agent Albé cleared his throat. “It’s not impossible,” he said. “There are several weapons on board with the necessary firepower. All you really need to do is accelerate a sufficiently massive slug close enough to lightspeed. A simple ballistic collision under such conditions is sufficient to achieve the desired result.”

“But you’re talking about accelerating *matter* to within something like a

billionth of a percent the speed of light,” said Captain Porras, taking up Watts’s objection. “Do you know how many sequenced atomic blasts it would take to push a ship that hard? The best light-chasers ever built can’t get within a thousandth of a percent—”

“It *can* be done,” Albé said with conviction.

He was talking about the *Bleteira*, that used a sequence of rapidly evaporating black holes to accelerate a slug of neutronium about the size of a grain of rice to within a trillionth of a percent of the speed of light

“But I’m not talking about using this type of weapon, in any case,” he said. “With any projectile weapon, we run the risk of interception.”

“Interception?” asked Captain Watts. “You can’t be serious. At those velocities? The attack would land before anyone could be made aware.”

Strategos Lin muttered, “You forget the Watchers, Daniel.”

“There are other weapons,” Albé interjected.

“*Astrophage*,” I said, speaking over him.

“The what?” asked one of Lin’s subordinates: Porras or Jael.

“*The Sun Eater*,” Albé said.

It was the first time I had ever heard those words spoken aloud, uttered in the plain and common speech of men.

The Sun Eater.

My mother—who had never been much of a mother, not until the very end—had visited me when once, when I was very small. I had taken ill with some far-starred virus, doubtless contracted from one of Father’s offworld guests. I had languished abed for the better part of a month, so weak had my little form become. Mother spent an afternoon at my side, lingering until night crept over my windowsills. She told me stories then, as I told stories to Cassandra in her creche. Perhaps that had been the start of it: my love affair with myth.

I recalled then one of the stories she’d told to me. A tale of Alexander and the Dragon, and of how the Dragon threatened to swallow the hero and his armies whole, that he might gain their strength and so establish his dominion over the kingdoms of the world, just as Alexander had done. “O Dragon!” Alexander said, “This thing you must not do! For even Alexander

is not master of the world, and—devouring us—our swords and spears will tear you from within, and you will die!”

“I will not die!” the Dragon said. “But if you are not master of the world, O King of Men, then who?”

And Alexander thrust his hand to the highest heaven, where the sun sat at the center of all things, and said, “There you see a true divinity! There is Helios! The sun himself, who is anchor and master of our world. And his flesh is fire, and no danger to you! There is your enemy, not Alexander!”

And so the dragon rose, and spread his wings, and lo! The shadow of them was like the night, and the gleam of horns and crowns upon his seven heads was like the very stars of Hydra. And it rose against the sun and struck at it, bit, and swallowed it whole.

But Alexander had tricked the beast, for the fire of the sun was hotter than any Dragon’s forge, brighter and purer than the smoldering pits of Sheol, and the Dragon could not contain it, so that its flesh turned to ash, its bones to powder, its shadow to new light.

Thus Alexander saved the world, and slew the Dragon without unsheathing his sword.

That, Mother told me, was how the men of the Golden Age perceived the eclipse of Earth’s own sun, and that Alexander’s conquest of the Dragon showed how man’s will demystified the world. But the story had had quite the opposite effect on me, instead put me in mind of dragons, of a race of dragons that ate the stars. As a boy I imagined slaying them, imagined great hunts riding out across the night to save the stars from these star-killers, and Crispin and I would race down corridors and up stairs, leap from inner walls into pools and onto carts in our quest to save creation.

Far from demystifying the world, Mother had enchanted it, so that every star might have its dragon, and need its Alexander.

The story, it turned out, was true. The Watchers were real, and as near to dragons in terror and majesty as anything in the cosmos may be. And they drank of the suns and their fire to give themselves shape and power.

In *Astrophage*, I had a dragon of my own.

Albé conjured a holograph, banished the wire-frame model of *Demiurge*

in the process. Teardrop shaped it was in profile, but flat as a blade, its body long and tapered, coming to a point at the narrow end, where the wide was fashioned into a huge, hollow ring, like the distended eye of a needle.

“This is the weapon,” Edouard said. “It’s a ship. Unmanned. Very small. About three hundred feet from end to end. The ring section is a little more than a third that diameter.”

“That’s it?” asked Watts. “That’s your sun-killer?”

Edouard just looked at him, blinked, pointed at the projection. “You see the ring section? There are a number of counter-rotating rings there. They’re not quite perfect circles. They’re very slightly off. When activated, they spin and generate an ultra-dense gravitation field, effectively wrinkling space near the center. The slight eccentricity of the rings makes that center unstable. A torus, not a point.”

“A singularity?” Kvaran asked.

“One created out of essentially zero mass,” said Edouard. “Whatever stray particles are caught within the field fall toward the center as the machine fires. Ordinarily, so light a singularity would evaporate in instants, but the machine superheats space inside the rings—maintaining the singularity long enough to allow for the influx of new matter. And if sufficient matter enters the singularity before it can collapse . . .”

“It stabilizes,” said Bassander Lin.

Edouard thrust a finger in the man’s direction. “Exactly.”

“Where does it get the mass?” asked Porras.

“From the target star,” Edouard said.

Blank stares greeted this pronouncement.

“It plunges into the sun,” I said, thinking of the dragon in Mother’s story. “By the time the ship fails, the singularity is surrounded by solar plasma.” I studied each shocked face in turn, imagining the dragon burned from within—but this dragon had a monster greater still in its belly. A void from which no light escaped. “It can drink its fill.”

“The ship is almost entirely adamant,” Edouard said. “It’s rated for temperatures up to approximately five thousand degrees.”

“How does that destroy a sun?” asked Watts.

“Once it’s stable, the singularity falls to center mass,” Edouard said. “It hollows out the star, stimulates core collapse.”

Watts understood at last, and blanched. “A supernova.”

“A hypernova,” Albé corrected, “given the speed of the collapse and a sufficiently massive sun.”

“The ultimate weapon,” I said.

Silence.

“You want to blow up a sun?” asked Porras, face pale as death.

“I want to destroy the Cielcin,” I said. I watched the horror spreading across the face of every man and woman present. “We can end this war in an instant.”

Bassander Lin looked almost gray, more than half a ghost.

At length Porras swallowed, asked, “Which sun? Where will you do this thing?”

“Where else?” I answered him. “Gododdin.”

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CHAPTER 40

THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

“WHAT WAS YOUR NAME?” I asked the dwarf in his jar. “Before you—”

“Before I took my first steps on the path?” Here Soonchanged had not moved in all the years since we had departed Annica system. A thin coat of dust lay over his chassis. “Before I *changed*?”

The cell itself had *not* changed. Black walls lit by flush white sconces surrounded us on all sides, and the heavy doors were shut. There was no furniture, no facilities, no accommodations of any kind—unless it was the medical equipment that kept the Exalted captain alive, and the white tarpaulin against one wall that lay wrapped around the mutant’s disconnected metal legs.

“Why have you come?” the captain asked, cameras trained on my face. “It has been—by my count—one year, three months, twenty-one days since our last conversation . . .” I felt a pang of guilt at the figure, certain it was correct.

“I do not mention this to prick your conscience, gentle lord,” said the captain. “As I stated in our previous conversation, I am more than comfortable. I *need* nothing. I certainly do not need you . . .” I heard his lenses shift focus: a faint, metallic *whir*. “Did something happen?”

I shut my eyes, saw only Cassandra’s face, her hair a black halo floating in pale fluid. “When we first met,” I spoke at last, “you told me that Kharn Sagara was a wall against the sea. What did you mean?”

The lens I had come to think of as Here Soonchanged’s eye slid forward in its housing, focusing more intently. “Do you really have to ask?”

I supposed I did not.

“You know what it is he saw on Vorgossos?” the captain asked. “When he was just a boy?”

“I do,” I said, holding my face still.

The young Sagara had witnessed true horror. His Mericanii captors had captured one of the Watchers. It had raised the dead, and so confronted the young Kharn with the eldritch truth: that there was *something* beyond the circles of our cosmos.

Something terrible.

That truth—that horror—had lit a fire in the young sorcerer. With Brethren’s help, he slew the Watcher, Selarnim, and the Mericanii who had enslaved him. He had taken Vorgossos for himself.

“Then you know he built this ship to fight them,” said the captain, rotating his bell jar to face me. “The Monumentals.”

I kept my cloak still tight about my shoulders, arms crossed. “Why?”

“Something happened, didn’t it?”

“Answer my question.”

“You answer mine.”

A hiss of air escaped me, as from a valve. In all the years of its imprisonment, the creature had made no threats, offered no challenge. I did not think him my enemy. “There was a battle.”

“You fought them,” said Here Soonchanged, clicking the iron pincers that served for hands. “And you failed.”

I turned my head aside.

“So you have come to me,” said he. “*Adept* that I am. Veteran of his occult wars—”

“Can they be killed?” I asked sharply. “Truly?”

“How long will I remain here?” the captain asked.

My eyes met his sensors, held firm. “I thought you were more than comfortable?”

“My ship, my *Azoth* is lost,” said he. “My people are dead, or taken by the Empire. There is nowhere for me to go, but I cannot remain your prisoner forever.”

“Nor do I intend to keep you,” I said.

“When, then, will I be freed?”

“When I am certain I’ve no further use for you.”

To my astonishment, Here Soonchanged laughed, a rough, barking sound . . . like coughing, like gunfire. “Then I will be here until the stars burn out.”

“Is that so?” I said, smile just barely reaching my eyes, after all.

“I know my uses,” said Here Soonchanged.

The silence that settled then had the quality of rotten ice. It gave way beneath my feet, and I let my arms fall at last. “I have no intention of keeping you here,” I said. “But I would not hand you to the Empire, and I will not give you a ship of your own.” Hands on hips, I shook my head. “You will remain here . . . until my task is done.”

“And what is your task, precisely?” he asked, raising his volume, but not his voice, so that I felt the words in my breast like the beating of heavy drums.

“To win the war,” I said simply, and spread my hands. “Against the Cielcin. Against *them*.” Though I had spoken softly—much *more* softly than the dwarf in his flask—I felt the weight of each word, deceptively heavy for their size, like lead shot.

“The war . . .” Here Soonchanged’s own voice shrank, hardly to be heard. He was silent so long that I started to wonder if there had not been some error, some fault in his machinery.

“Captain?” I asked, and took one careful step toward him.

There was nothing. No breath or motion, unless it was the percolation of tiny bubbles in the amber fluid of his tank.

“Captain Soonchanged?”

When at last he spoke, it was in hushed tones, his volume minimized. “Hereward,” he said. “Hereward Mot.”

“What?” I’d had to stoop to hear, leaned over the dusty jar. Sat on the floor, Here Soonchanged hardly reached my waist.

“You asked me my name,” he said, “from . . . from *before*. I am—I was—Hereward of the House of Mot. My father was of Avalon, from an old family. My mother was the high priestess of the temple of Nut at Phoenix.”

Nut? My mind went to the tall miters worn by the clergy, the hieroglyphs that adorned their stoles. “The . . . Egyptian god?”

The one-time priest kept talking, speaking as though I were not there at all. “I was born in the City of the Pyramids itself, on the shores of the Potomac. My father used to take me to watch the priestesses practicing their *asanas* before the shrine on the Isle of Hain, under the cherry trees.”

I was standing over him, a couple of paces away. It might have been miles. Light-years.

“He took me to Rome,” he said, “for my Feast of Fire. His men had captured a girl from the hill tribes—a proper Sabine—to make a man of me. Before that he took me up the Aventine Hill, where Remus saw his birds, where the God Emperor crowned himself. There was a priory there—one of the buildings the Americans did not take down when they annexed the city. The Order had taken it for their own, and there was a keyhole in the garden door that looked out on the pyramid not five miles away . . .”

“Earth,” I whispered. He was talking about Earth. Not as men in the Imperium—as a goddess, an ideal—but as a *place*. A real place.

“They set the girl loose in the garden, dressed her in nothing but paint . . .” Here Soonchanged sounded like my terminal reciting prose. My interjections had no effect. “They sent me in after her. She had leaves in her hair . . .”

“What’s the City of Pyramids?” I asked.

Here Soonchanged rotated his jar to face me—a pointless symbol, given that his eyes were swollen shut. “And you call yourself a historian.” He tutted, rotated his jar back and forth—as if shaking his head. “But then, that name is known only to a few. I speak, of course, of that Alexandria of the West, of Washington of the Many Rivers. The Domain of Columbia.”

I froze. “The Mericanii city? You were born there?” It was as if he said he had come from Faerie. From Ys. From lost Lyonesse. “The Domain of Columbia . . . the Chantry rebuilt it?”

“It was never destroyed,” said Here Soonchanged. “The armies of your God Emperor destroyed the machines, but they left the pyramids still standing.”

“Still standing?” I let my shoulder strike the wall, found myself once more staring at the place where Soonchanged’s legs lay stacked like

cordwood. “The cities of the Mericanii are . . . still standing?” I was reeling, felt that I must surely fall. All my life, I had imagined the Earth a radioactive cinder, a desert where nothing grew. A place of ghosts and atoms. In my mind, the death of Earth had been the *wergild* of all mankind, the price we paid to free ourselves from our own creation.

A lie.

“Do not mistake me,” said Here Soonchanged. “Much of what was is destroyed. The Windsors saw to that. But there is much that was not lost.” I heard the shutters in his cameras contract once more.

“What is it like?” I asked.

“The homeworld?” I imagined the captain raising eyebrows he no longer had. “It is only a place, like any other.”

“Don’t try to deceive me, Captain,” I said. “Tell me the truth.” For a moment, I forgot the war and the torments of Danu. I forgot Cassandra’s suffering. Forgot my own pain.

The captain’s taloned appendages clicked open and shut in their sockets. “The Sollan Empire has stood so long that—for most of the galaxy—it is as though it was *always there*, a part of the landscape, a thing unchangeable. But it had a beginning. To most of the men and women in the galaxy, the Foundation War is only a story. As well it were founded by twins grown strong on wolf’s milk . . .”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“That the Earth is not a god to me, or to any of the Order. Only a rock in space.”

Had I not said as much to Crispin myself that last day in Meidua, in the airfield beyond my father’s city? “The Order?” I said at last. “You mean the Chantry?”

If Here Soonchanged could have controlled his face of flesh, I thought then, he might have smiled. “Let us say that the gods of the gods of *my* fathers are not the gods of yours.”

“Speak plainly, damn you!”

The chrysalid swiveled on its stand. “The *Order* is not the Chantry,” he said. “The Order *made* the Chantry.”

“You’re talking about your High Patriarch,” I said. “The second empire.”

The thing that had been Hereward Mot raised a claw, an almost schoolmasterish gesture. “Do you know how the Chantry began?”

“The Empire created it,” I said. “Emperor Titian—”

“At the Order’s urging!” said he, volume amplified. “The Chantry are only the . . . public face. The glove on the Order’s hand.”

I could not help but shake my head. “You’re asking me to believe that some secret society has steered the Imperium from the beginning—”

“I am not asking you to do anything,” said Here Soonchanged. “I am telling you the truth. You have already seen for yourself. The Sentinels. Lord Douro. The . . . intelligence they brought aboard this ship. If still you doubt, Lord Marlowe, I begin to doubt your faculties.”

I was pacing as he spoke, circling the chamber. The chrysalid rotated as I revolved, his face forever facing mine.

“Man cannot govern himself,” the captain said. “He must be ruled—but by what?”

“You sound like you agree with them,” I said.

“You don’t?” said Here Soonchanged. “Can you stand there and tell me—truly—that the average greengrocer from one of your muddy little villages is capable of grasping the truth as you have found it?”

I wanted to bark a reply, to shout yes and so defy the monster in his bottle.

But I was silent. The truth was I knew that he was right. Had I not myself kept secret all that I had learned from all but a few? Had I not myself seen the horror of the Watchers unleashed? Was I not myself a lord, acting for the good of my people?

Sensing he had scored a point, the captain pressed his advantage. “You could destroy them, you know?”

I looked at him, still unspeaking.

“This ship . . . it is the ultimate power in our world. For all the art and power the Order and the Chantry have obtained, they have not produced a Felsenburgh . . .” His claws tapped against their hollow housings. “They are

powerful—more powerful by far than their chattel in the Imperium, more powerful even than the lords of the dark between the stars . . . but they are as nothing measured against the power at your command. You could take the throne.”

The throne.

I had seen it. Many times. Had seen myself seated amid velvet and polished gold, laurel-crowned, Selene at my feet. The red sun of the Aventine setting. My star ascendant. Ushara had shown me that future—but so had the Quiet, the Absolute himself. Was I to take it? The thought filled me with an unease I could not explain. As Emperor, I might bend the forces of man to my will, shatter the Cielcin, break the back of their armies. I might drive the Watchers to the brink, might hurl them from our cosmos into the nothingness that awaits them beyond space and time.

“I could help you, you know,” said Here. “Earlier we spoke of my *use*. I am at my beginning. You have had a foretaste of what I might become.”

Countless hands, pale and grasping, floated like kelp in the white matter of my brain. I looked at him, the man in the jar—the creature that once had been a man, that had made himself something else. His hands were webbed, vestigial things, frail as reeds. His nose was squashed flat, nostrils slit, and those gashes at his throat. Gills? The legs seemed half-flippers.

An infant Jörmungandr. An embryonic Abaia.

A Leviathan in the making.

“You offer yourself as heir to the Chantry,” I said, “and to Brethren, both.”

“There is much I could teach you,” said Here Soonchanged. “Much I could do. I but need a home. A place to begin *the changing*.”

The changing. I had a sudden image of the dwarf Soonchanged emerging from his tank, crawling out on black sands like some soft-shelled tortoise, relying on those spindly arms to drag himself toward the surf, pale moons rising on the horizon. There to eat, and grow. Brethren had been a composite organism, a fusion of iron and flesh and flesh and flesh, countless minds made one and together. He would be something else. A single mind, a single will from the beginning. Fully man, fully god.

My mind recoiled, and my heart.

“And in return,” I said, feeling sick, and crossing my arms, I turned fully to face the little thing, “you would back my claim to the throne.”

“Yes,” said Here. “I would be your servant.”

“You would be my sponsor,” I said. “My patron. My god.”

“And you would be the Lord of Man,” said he.

“I would be your slave,” I said. “Your instrument.”

“My ally,” he said. “My *client*. Our goals are not misaligned. You seek victory. I seek eternity. You want knowledge. I want protection.”

I tried to picture the man he had been. Hereward Mot. Priest of the Chantry. Master of the Order. Child of Earth herself. I couldn’t do it. “No,” I said at last, shaking my head. “No, I will not take the throne.”

“Then it is hopeless,” said the former priest. “They will destroy you.”

“They’ve tried,” I said, and fell silent, thumbs hooked in my belt. I bent at the neck, peered down at the polished floor. “If it is as easy as you say, why did the Undying not take the throne himself? Conquer the Empire? Destroy it? Why hide on Vorgossos?”

Here Soonchanged did not answer me at once, instead grasped one pincer with the other, as if wringing his hands. It was strange, I realized, to think of *nervousness* in such a creature, to see so human a gesture on so inhuman a form. “He was not hiding from your Empire.”

“The Watchers?”

“The Monumentals,” said he, using the Imperial word. “He has fought them before. Many times. Down across the ages. That is why I joined him. Why I forsook the Chantry. The Order.”

“I thought it was to seek *the path*?” I said, unable to keep the bitter edge from my voice.

“I told you,” said he, “that our goals are not misaligned.” Again his talons clattered one against the other. “You hate our kind because you were raised to.”

“I do not hate your kind.”

“Don’t play the child,” he said. “You hate us. You hate *him*. But he has kept mankind safe in ways even you cannot comprehend.”

“He allied himself with the Cielcin!” I roared suddenly, surging forward, finger thrust at the floor. “With Dorayaica itself!”

Here Soonchanged did not move. It could not. “You think it so simple as that?” His cameras narrowed. “You discovered what he did to their telegraphs, I understand?”

I shut my eyes. “You’re saying . . .” My mouth was unaccountably dry. “You’re saying Kharn Sagara meant to destroy them?”

“I am saying he was prepared to do so, if it proved necessary.”

“He was waiting,” I said. “Waiting for them to destroy the Empire. The Chantry.”

Silence.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Here Soonchanged raised his volume, hoping almost to deafen me. “Because you know the answer!” His voice shook dust from the very walls. “You know it can be done!”

I just stood there.

“Why are you here, lord? After all these years?”

I kept seeing their faces when I closed my eyes. The Danuan *redlings*. My own men. Every one of them leering, blood-soaked, eyes and teeth white in red faces, each transformed by Ushara’s presence. I saw their victims, too—they were all victims. Ghoshal. Laxman. Holden. William. The woman dead and raped in the airlock . . .

Cassandra. Cassandra most of all.

“All I have are stories,” I said at last. “Kharn and Selarnim. The Empire at Nairi. Twice now, I’ve fought them. First at Sabratha, now at Danu. Both times I failed . . .” My hands became fists, became stones. “Earlier, you called yourself a veteran of Kharn’s wars. Tell me . . .” I hesitated, knowing that *this* is why I had come, was what I sought from the wretched creature in the jar. “Tell me you’ve seen them die.”

The chrysalid rotated his jar until his back was to me, the neck and upper spine implanted with what seemed a rod of black metal, a conduit whence countless wires ran, connecting the changeling’s flesh to his machinery.

“Please.”

Soonchanged was silent then, and utterly still.

“Sagara himself told me the cause is hopeless,” I said, recalling our meeting in the pyramid-palace of Latarra. “He told me they cannot be killed.”

It is folly even to try . . .

That was the reason he had retreated to Vorgossos, whiling away eternity, gnawing on the years like bones, clinging to a life half-lived. Soonchanged had said before that Kharn had battled the Watchers, that he has kept mankind safe in that dark between the stars. What had changed for him, I wondered? What had happened to make him give up that fight?

The chrysalid did not answer me, nor did it stir in its tank.

“But you think differently,” I said, drawing near to the tank once more. “I need to know what you know. What you’ve seen!” I crouched, made my head level with the magi’s own. “Tell me!”

Silence.

I reached out, lay one hand against the side of the jar. The impulse to smash that container gripped me then, as it had in the temple of Ragama, when I faced the Quiet’s egg. “If there is no hope, why did he build *Demiurge*?” I was shouting. “Why did he fight them? What changed?”

Silence.

“Damn you! Speak!”

Ghoshal’s leering face. Holden’s sacrifice. Young William’s death . . .

Cassandra . . . Cassandra . . . Cassandra . . .

When at last the creature spoke, it was in a voice soft and gentle as dry leaves on stone. Not the voice of the machine that housed the ugly chrysalid, that black baritone—so like Sagara’s own.

It was the voice of a man, tired and trembling, and very, very old.

“Yes,” it said at last. “I have seen them die. Leastways, I think I have.” His voice put me in mind of wizened hands, long-fingered and fragile. “We trapped one, in Sagittarius. About a star of 47 Tucanae. We fed it to a black hole. Another we burned away. There is a weapon in your Arsenal, the Archon *Sica*, capable of gutting a star as a blade might a man. We spilled

fire across the void . . . They are made of light, you know. Of patterns in light. A powerful enough magnetic current can burn them away . . .” His voice faded. “I have . . . *seen* things, Lord Marlowe. Things even you, I think, dare not imagine.”

I *could* imagine it, having seen the horrors even a weakened Ushara was capable of. At Sabratha and Danu alike.

“What did it do to you?” it asked. I could hear the faint whine of servos as Father Hereward’s suite of optical sensors found my face. “The Monumental you fought?”

Did I dare tell him everything? Did I dare tell him *anything*?

“Let me guess,” he said. “It took their minds. Drove them mad.”

My eyes went to the camera. “You’ve seen it?”

“Many times,” said he. “They attack the mind, attack consciousness itself, like a virus.”

I thought of Urbaine’s worm, of Valka’s tattooed hand clawing at her own throat.

“I’ve seen whole ships—stations, cities—turn on themselves,” he said. “*Fear as plague*, my lord. That is how they gain their foothold. Fear and despair.”

“Fear and despair . . .” I said, muttering.

“They are not of this world,” the captain said, voice quavering. “They existed *before*—did you know that? Before the Cataclysm? The Rupture? Before this universe *became*?”

I nodded.

“They are its masters—its makers, I think.” He was speaking faster then, words smashing into one another in his haste to finish now that he’d begun. “You asked what changed. Why Kharn stopped fighting them. Why he was hiding on Vorgossos. Why he allied with the Cielcin. It was *that* discovery. The knowledge that the universe is not real. That it was *made*.”

“Those two things aren’t in contradiction.”

Soonchanged was silent a moment. “We are insects, all of us. Bugs in a jar. Only Kharn realized it . . .” His voice faded. “All his life, he thought he was hunting predators. He was only fighting shadows. The shadows of the

hands outside the jar. That is what changed. He learned the fight is hopeless. That is why he withdrew to Vorgossos.”

“He was looking for a way out of the bottle,” I said. “But he never found it.”

“There is no way out,” said Here Soonchanged. “We can but escape further in.”

“Into your artificial universe?” I said, gesturing at the captain’s chassis.

“You are not listening,” he said. “It is all artificial. This was made. All of it. By what means I do not know. Perhaps we are programs running on some cosmic machine—just characters on a page. Perhaps there was an older universe, and ours is only their answer to the ultimate question. Perhaps *they* are like me.”

I stood at last. “Or perhaps they’re nothing like you at all.”

“Perhaps,” said Here. “But we will never know. Not really.”

“But the weapons *work*,” I said.

“They work,” said the captain. “But can they *truly* destroy them? Or do we only burn the hand that touches the bottle?” The jar turned at last, the dwarf within bloated and seemingly asleep. “We cannot escape.”

“I don’t believe that,” I said.

“They are the masters of our reality. Its programmers.”

“But you’ve seen them die,” I said.

“Did I?” asked the chrysalid. “Or did they simply withdraw?”

“You’re a coward,” I said. “You and Sagara, both.”

“I am immortal,” said Here Soonchanged. “The only thing that can kill an immortal is *a mistake*.”

“I could kill you now,” I said, not threatening.

“You won’t,” said Here Soonchanged. Father Hereward’s voice vanished, was replaced by the black metal voice of the would-be godling. “I am not your enemy. You know that. I am no threat to you, have made no threats. You need me.”

“Do I?” I had resumed pacing, orbiting the dismembered machine-man.

“You go to face the Empire. The Chantry. The Order. You do not know them as I do.”

“Are you offering your services?”

“I am offering *an accord*,” said he.

Once more I drew my cloak around myself. “I told you,” I said. “I do not want the throne.”

“Then do not take it.” A thin stream of bubbles escaped the creature’s mouth, disturbed the amber fluid. “But you will need me, all the same. If you will not be my patron, I ask my freedom in payment for my aid.”

It was my turn not to speak. The man was a monster. Left alone, he would grow into something *like* what Brethren had been. Man and machine together, a titan and titanic intellect. A great intelligence, one artificial as Columbia herself.

A living god.

But he had committed no crime. Not against me.

“I will think on it, and on all you have said,” I said, and, turning, hammered on the door to be let out. As the portal split open, I looked back, bowing my head over one shoulder as the guards without snapped to attention. “Thank you, Father Hereward.”

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CHAPTER 41

DEVIL AND DAUGHTER

“ON GUARD!” EDOUARD WAS shouting. “Sahak! Taran! Stunners up!”

The two HAPSIS legionnaires A2 had ordered to the surgery checked their guns, made ready, disruptor muzzles glaring a bright, electric blue.

“Stay back, all of you!” I shouted, waving them down. *Let her be all right*, I silently prayed, moving to stand before the casket. *Just let her be all right.*

Our eyes met. Violet and viridian.

Her eyebrows arched. Her nose and mouth were concealed by the mask and hose, but she pressed her hand to the glass, palm white as chalk. She knew me. A relief I can scarce describe stole through me. There was a chance—had been a chance—that the damage to her brain had been so extensive that, even repaired, she would not be herself when she awakened.

I pressed my own hand to the glass, placed it over Cassandra’s.

“Start the flush,” I said.

The medical technician at the console issued the order more properly, keying in a command.

The auto-surgeon’s cool, feminine voice answered. “*Complying.*”

In the casket, Cassandra started, looked up—her short hair billowing about her face. The fluid about her—faintly green and golden—roiled as it was replaced with clear water. For an instant, globules of the healing nectar hung in suspension, spiraling down about Cassandra’s legs as one fluid replaced the other.

I did not take my hand away, not even when the tank began to slide forward at its base, following tracks in the floor, tipping back so that Cassandra’s naked form settled into the padding behind her. When she was lying flat, the tank began to drain, water rushing through unseen siphons.

She had not stood in months. Despite the healing waters of the tank, despite the little machines still scrabbling in her tissues, there would be weakness. Shaking. Atrophy.

I heard the high whining of sonic scrubbers—just on the edge of hearing—saw what moisture remained blasted off her, as though a hideous wind filled the glass tube where she lay. Cassandra looked up at me, brow furrowed above her mask. She placed a hand on the intubator, asking.

I shook my head.

The auto-surgeon's mechanical arms descended over the lid of the casket, a suite of instruments skated over the glass. "*Report,*" the machine's coolly feminine voice declared: "*Heart rate and blood oxygen levels well within normal tolerances. Pupil response optimal.*"

"What about her brain?" I asked.

The machine heard me. "*Electroencephalography indicates elevated levels of neural activity.*"

I flinched, glanced nervously to Edouard, who stood back with Neema and Princess Selene. The HAPSIS agent pressed his lips together.

"Stress?" I asked.

"*Alert: Commencing extraction.*"

Pneumatics hissed, pins moved. The lid jumped as it opened, rose, and rolled back a stage before it lifted up, hinging back like a snake preparing to strike. I hate that I flinched, that my hand went to my belt.

Fear is a poison. Gibson's voice was in my ear.

She tried to rise, but sagged back against the mat. She had been so long in the tank. Seven months . . . seven months into our three-year journey. She would hardly be able to stand. The medical bath was not fugue. In fugue, the body's fibers, their temper, their condition, were held in stasis, frozen, unchanging. There was tiredness, aches, pains. But not atrophy. Cassandra had been alive—not conscious, but not frozen, either.

She could not have stood without assistance.

The surgeon's myriad metal arms descended, rubberized peds applying gentle pressure to arms and shoulders, holding my daughter down. More iron hands closed about the shaft protruding from her mask, drew it forth

with a sound like a knife being withdrawn from flesh. Cassandra coughed as the intubator and feeding tubes came free, might have retched had her stomach not been empty. I wanted to rush to her, but the machine was not finished. Its countless limbs moved down her body, removing electrodes and other bits of sensory equipment, everything but the catheter and blood line.

Her hand came up, and I caught it, held it fast.

“I’m here!” I said, voice rough, rasping. “Cassandra, I’m here!”

She tried to speak, spluttered, spat.

I helped her to sit up, wrapped my arms around her.

“Don’t try to speak,” I said, and not letting go of my girl, I shouted, “Won’t someone get me a blanket?” Taran and Sahak kept their weapons trained on her. “You’ll be all right,” I said.

A blanket—quilted, black, machined—floated into my peripheral vision. I snatched at it. “Thank you, Nee—” I froze, found Selene looking at me—at both of us. Neema was still standing by Edouard, had drawn only perhaps a step nearer. “Thank you,” I said to Her Highness.

Selene smiled, laid a dry hand on my shoulder. To Cassandra, she said, “We were worried about you, you know?”

I shook out the blanket Selene had given me, wrapped it round Cassandra’s shoulders. Her hand snaked numbly out from under the black folds, held the thing in place. She coughed softly.

“Stand back, Princess,” I said, suddenly stern.

Selene stiffened, and I bent down, brought my face level with Cassandra’s. “Here,” I said, a hand on either shoulder, “look here, girl. Just here.”

She was shivering. It was too damn cold in the surgery. She needed rest. A warm bed. Water. Proper food. One thing at a time.

“Cassandra!” I said, shaking her gently. “Here!”

She looked at me, and I feared what I might see in those eyes: Incomprehension. Unrecognition.

Hate.

Had Kharn’s machines botched their work? Murdered my child in spirit,

if not in flesh?

Or had Ushara?

“Anaryan!”

Once again, those green eyes touched mine, slid across my face. Still, I held her firm.

“Ushara?”

“Abba.” She coughed, hunched over, her head against mine.

Her eyes! Her eyes!

I’d seen them plain, studied them—studied *her*—across countless fractal potentials, watched her eyes watching mine. They were as they had been in her final moments, as the blood ran from her hollow heart: hers. Totally and completely hers.

“Abba . . .” She wrapped her arm around me. “Abba . . . I . . . I saw . . .”

She rasped, coughed, fell back onto the mat.

“Cassandra?” What had she seen?

“We should get her to the medica,” said Doctor Farra, a pale woman with a cap of golden hair. She was one of Lin’s people.

Edouard’s voice cut across the commotion, loud and clear. “Restrain her.”

My head jerked round. “That won’t be necessary.”

“With all due respect,” said Edouard, stepping forward, hands clasped behind his back, “it *is* necessary. We *know* that she was compromised. The others all showed persistent symptoms from the Watcher’s psychic attack.”

“She’s all right,” I said.

“Hadrian,” Edouard said. “Please. Stand aside.”

I looked at my daughter, tangled, half covered by her blanket where she lay. Her hand rose, reached for me. Fell. Her eyes closed; head turned; whole body went limp. Reaching out, I covered her more carefully. Checked her breathing, her pulse. She was alive.

He spoke sense—I knew that—and yet to accede felt like treason.

“Very well,” I said, and stood aside.

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I followed Cassandra's pallet and her guards the whole way to the medica, Neema and Selene in my train. Edouard lingered as well, conferring with Sahak and Taran, whom he appointed to keep watch.

"You're going to stay?" Selene asked, brushing up beside me.

"Yes," I said. "I want to be here when she awakens."

She did not awaken. Not when Sanak and Taran transferred her to her bed, not when the auto-surgeon administered its checks, not when I laid a hand upon her brow and spoke her name.

"She's very weak," said Doctor Farra, the woman with the golden hair. "She needs rest—and food."

"I'll see to that," Neema said, twisting his hands.

The doctor hadn't finished. "We still don't know the extent of the damage she sustained." Her pale eyes were touched by sorrow. "There may be memory loss. Her personality may be impacted."

"She's all right," I said. She had said my name.

Doctor Farra smiled, but gave no reply.

Selene interjected then, asking, "How long until she wakes up?"

The doctor only shook her head, bowed as she replied, "I can't tell you that for certain, Highness. It may be today, or tomorrow. If it's longer than that, we may need to think about another feeding tube, I . . ." She broke off, looked up at the arms of the machine surgeon with no small measure of skepticism. "The damage to her heart and lungs was extensive. You were lucky, Lord Marlowe. Your puncture was clean. Hers . . . well, it's a miracle, what these machines can do . . ."

I accepted this with a nod, swallowed, turned to look back at my daughter in her bed. They'd found clothes for her—a patient's white tunic and trousers, so that almost she seemed a neophyte again, a novice of the Fire School. "It does make you wonder," I said, "why we deny ourselves such marvels . . ."

"You know why," said Edouard.

"You've my comm if she worsens," the doctor said. "I must return to *Tempest*. The . . . ship will see to her in an emergency."

"Thank you, Doctor," I said, and dismissing her, turned and took my

place at my daughter's side. Selene came and stood over me, one hand on my shoulder.

Presently, Edouard spoke. "It's good she's out of the tube," he said. "You were three days between the tube and waking."

"No matter," I said, reaching out to smooth Cassandra's shorn locks from her face.

I could feel the intelligence man standing perhaps half a dozen paces to my back. "You . . . shouldn't blame yourself," he said at last.

"Should I not?" I asked, looking past Selene over my shoulder.

Edouard had never been one to quail at the sight of my face, even after my regeneration. He stood a little straighter. "It was my notion to go down to the surface, to save Argo and his people."

"And you were right to do so," I said, laying a hand on Selene's to gently coax her into releasing me. "We saved nearly three thousand lives."

"If I had not brought them on board . . ."

"Then Ushara would have found her way into the hearts of our men all the same, Edouard," I said. "You were not on *Tempest*, or *Gran Squall*. You are not the one who called the beast down on all our heads. The blood of Sattha Kull and his people is not on your hands."

"I still—"

"*You* nothing," I said. "I understand the desire to take blame, but this is not *your* doing. If you seek someone to blame, blame the Watchers. Blame Dorayaica. Do not blame yourself."

The other man looked down at his polished boots, adjusted his ivory spectacles, his oiled hair. He ventured a word, stopped himself, removed his glasses. "Why did . . . why did it take her? I mean . . . why some of us, and not others?"

Why not me instead?

He didn't have to say it. I'd felt it, too.

What could I say?

"I don't know," I ultimately said, and looked up at Selene. Both she and I had refused Ushara's seduction. Might it be only that Cassandra and the others had accepted?

On Sabratha, it was my arrogance that almost had proved my undoing. I had thought to face the creature alone. I had not *known* what she was, how small *I* was—and that had almost destroyed me.

“I almost think . . .” I started, still stroking Cassandra’s brow. “I think . . . I think that we open the door ourselves. With our weaknesses. Our doubts. Our pain. Cassandra . . . I could see how heavy a toll all this was taking on her. The horror of it all.”

“As it would on anyone,” Selene said. She had seated herself on the edge of the next vacant bed.

I nodded wearily.

“You think it’s fear?” Edouard asked. “You think the creature uses fear to weaken us?”

“*Kalamphara!*” Neema swore, drawing every eye. The Nemrutti man had been uncharacteristically quiet, but when I turned to look at him, I found his eyes were wet with tears.

“Neema?” I asked.

“Twaddle!” he said, flapping his hands for emphasis. “Forgive me for saying so, *Domi*. The young mistress is many things, but *afraid?*”

A tiny laugh escaped me. “You’re right,” I said. “She wasn’t frightened. She was angry. I’d never seen her so angry before . . .” I fell silent, cowed by the memory of her face. The horror and the fury writ there . . . so close to madness.

Madness . . .

The word meant both *anger* and *insanity*. What truth there was in that relationship, and what a lesson.

“Madness . . .” I said the word aloud. “It’s madness. They want us broken. Despairing . . . terrified.”

Edouard touched the cruciform he wore beneath his tunic jacket. “Terror is viral,” he said at last. “As the terror spreads . . .”

“I know,” I said. Every poor soul taken in the Watchers’ grip would inspire terror in others.

“It’s like . . . plague,” Selene said.

“Were you not affected?” I asked Edouard.

The younger man shook his head. “No.”

A *hmm* escaped me.

“Perhaps the bridge is well-enough protected,” Edouard said.

“Perhaps,” I said. But had I not felt their eyes in that place before?

“Why did the creature not do this at Sabratha?” Edouard asked.

Again, I had no answer. There were simply too many questions. “You’re beginning to sound like Captain Watts,” I said. “Maybe she was too weak then, or maybe there was no need. Maybe she would have, had the battle gone on. The NEM weapon wounded her very badly. Perhaps we didn’t give her the chance . . .”

Edouard slid his fingers up under his glasses, palpated the eyes beneath. “*Mon Dieu!*” he hissed, “but we are in the dark, aren’t we?”

Cassandra stirred where she lay, face contorted for a moment in an expression like fear. I made a hushing sound, lay my hand once more upon her brow. Neema was right. That fear was so unlike her, and yet after all she had endured . . . She tried to roll, but the bonds that held her at breast and waist and thigh prevented it.

Forgive me, I thought.

This will pass, another voice whispered, a voice not quite my own.

“We’ve done all we can for her,” Edouard said.

“I know,” I said. “Forgive me. I grow weary of talk.”

“Of course,” Edouard said. At once awkward, he crossed the floor to her bedside, went to one knee before me, beside her, and taking her lonely hand in his, he spoke. I hardly heard him, so soft was he in that instant, and spoke hurriedly. “Raphael of the Seven who standeth before the Throne; Angel of Health, the Lord hath filled thine hand with balm from heaven to soothe our every hurt. Heal this victim of disease, console her in her suffering. Pray, guide us on our journey, for we are doubtful of our way.”

His eyes found mine, and—suddenly embarrassed—he released my daughter’s hand. Then standing, he bowed to Selene, saluted me, and was gone. I felt an unaccountable lightness in his wake, as though some gentle wave had lifted my heart and tossed it in his passing.

“What a remarkable boy,” Selene said.

“He is.”

The princess looked at me, a small frown on her perfect face. “What was all that?”

“He means well,” I said.

“If he is measure of these pagans,” Selene said, “I almost wish we had ten thousand of them.”

“Edouard is one of a kind.”

• • •

In the end, Neema fell asleep, but only after hours of nervous pacing and fretting and compulsive straightening of the already straight medica. In the process, he had discovered that the far wall of the chamber was a polarized mirror, a window opening onto one of *Demiurge*’s countless aquaria, where dwelt fish without number, shoals and schools of them, all to feed a population that had never come.

Why Kharn Sagara had built such a vessel was no great mystery. The scale of it was necessary to house the Mericanii weapons and to contain the prismatic geometries of hall and spar that confused the eyes of the Watchers.

But why had he built it to be *peopled*?

Had he intended it to be a new Vorgossos? His life raft should the planet be compromised, only to abandon that purpose after Dorayaica had constructed the massive world-engines that made Vorgossos itself his ship? Lorian had spoken of a desire to quit the galaxy entire, to take Vorgossos beyond all human space.

Orphan would know.

I had only to ask it.

“I saw her . . .”

The words were small, dry as dead leaves. I returned to the world of four dimensions with a start. Two green eyes there were, peering blearily up at me. “Abba?”

"I'm here." My hand found hers.

"Abba . . ." Cassandra tried to rise, failed. "I saw Amma."

I blinked. "You . . . what?"

"I saw her . . ." Her fingers tightened on mine. "It was dark. I couldn't breathe. I was crawling. Crawling. Abba—I had both my hands! There was a light ahead, and people. So many people! They were holding . . . candles, I think. They had gray robes. I tried to call out to them, but I couldn't. There was no air! But one of them came to me. It was Amma."

I had frozen solid.

"She took me by the hands . . ." She was weeping openly. Her voice was weak. Dry. So terribly dry. "'Tis not your time, little mouse,' she said to me. 'You have to turn around now.' Only I didn't want to, Abba—I didn't want to. I'd only *just arrived*, I—" She choked, fingers squeezing mine.

I held her tight.

Little mouse . . .

Neema had awakened, sat forward in his chair.

"She hugged me, Abba, held me tight. 'He needs you,' she said. 'He can't do this alone, and it can't be me.' She stood me up. Picked up her candle—the flame was pure white . . ."

The Howling Dark . . . she had been to the Howling Dark.

"You . . . saw her?" I asked. I had felt the others in that darkness, but I had *seen* nothing, and no one but myself.

"And others!" she said, eyes on mine. "I didn't see their faces. Couldn't . . . I—Neema!"

"Young mistress . . ." The Nemrutti's face was beaming. "You are . . . yourself?"

A shadow fell on Cassandra's face, and for a terrible moment, I feared that she would smile, that fire would catch in those emerald eyes. "Ushara . . ." she said. "Is that why I'm . . ." She pulled against the straps that bound her.

"Yes," I said. "Edouard and I thought it best."

"Edouard's all right, then?" she asked. "Is there water?"

Neema found the water before me, and hurried to fill a cup for the girl. I

discovered the bed controls and sat Cassandra up, not loosening her bonds.

When Cassandra had drunk her fill, she held the empty glass against her leg, stared into its shadowed depths as though it were a window. “There were so many of them. Thousands. Millions. They stretched to the horizon, Abba. She was just on the edge . . .” She looked at me, the tracks of her fallen tears turned aside by the light of her smile. “She was waiting for me. She turned me back, pointed. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done . . . ‘Cassandra!’ She said my name, and I knew I shouldn’t look back—but I did . . .”

I could almost see it: the tide of man’s memory marching away forever, each gray figure clinging to his little lamp. The darkness of time faded as we approached, black turned gray, gray silver. White. In the distance, a great music—the music—rang out ever clearer. It was as if we stood on the margins of a limitless ocean, our feet in shifting sand.

“‘Tell your father he was right,’ she said. ‘Quite right.’”

I pulled my hand from hers, turned to hide my face.

“Abba? Right about what?”

It really had been *her*.

I love you, too, I thought, and stared at the roof above, the ribbed vaults, the round lights like eyes. “Neema,” I said, “help me untie her.”

“But, *Domi*—”

I turned, numb hands moving to the straps. The message had come from Valka—could only come from Valka. And so I knew our daughter was safe.

Little mouse, she’d called her—would have called her, had she lived.

Little mouse.

Cassandra tried to sit up properly, turned to roll half into me. I wrapped my arms around her. And so I held her close for the first time since she had killed herself, and nearly killed us both.

“Anaryan.” I did not let her go. “Promise me you won’t do that again?”

“What? Die?” She laughed weakly. “I’m your daughter. I can’t promise you that.”

CHAPTER 42

FROM DANGER INTO DANGER

IT WOULD BE WEEKS before Cassandra made a full recovery, and in all that time, no sign was there of Ushara's presence in her. Valka's shade had driven Ushara from her, just as Ragama had driven her from me. That, or death itself had severed the bond there was between them.

Edouard—initially furious that I had freed her without consulting him—relaxed in the days that followed her reawakening, but insisted that we place her under closer and constant guard. Her memory of the incident was blessedly sparse. She remembered the Watcher's voice, its threats, its whispered promises. It had offered her revenge. The means to kill Dorayaica. Miudanar.

A new arm, and more . . .

. . . the chance to take *my* place, to take up *my* burden.

To spare me my pains.

Together, the beast had said, they would destroy the Cielcin. Cassandra would be the hero, would take the throne beside one of William's countless princes.

But she did recall her final moments. The blade piercing both our hearts. The blood pouring from her mouth. Falling. Falling. My face on the floor. My hand crawling, straining to reach her own. Then darkness.

Reader, I have often thought—have little said in this account—that I am insane. Despite all I have seen, despite all I have done and *can* do, despite Annica and Berenike. Despite Senuessa and Sybaris. Despite Vorgossos and Akterumu itself, I find the *truth* I have learned nearly impossible to believe. Even now, I find the truth incredible, and marvel at the Absolute's design. *Why?* I ask myself, will ask myself forever. *Why? Why? Why?*

I may never have my answer.

But to hear from one who made my journey beyond death and saw all I had seen and more . . . to hear Valka's words—words I had never shared with Cassandra—issue from our daughter's mouth . . . it was a peace and consolation I had never expected to find.

Still, I set Ramanthanu and Otomno both to watch her, and Inamax and a number of the Irchtani. Under Doctor Farra's watchful eye, Cassandra strengthened her body once again, overcoming the atrophy of the tank. There were cognitive tests as well, and Cassandra spent long hours closeted with Selene, talking. The two of them had grown close during the trip from Forum to Latarra, and had spent much of the voyage to Danu together. It was good for her to have someone other than me to speak to. I saw them of a time together, seated on some bench in the ship's garden, or walking down some corridor, heads close together.

In time, there was nothing to do but wait. Lin and I had had every meeting, discussed every facet of every issue. We'd interviewed every survivor of the Danuan village, treated their wounded.

"What is to become of us?" asked old Argo. The eolderman had regained his sight after a stay in one of Kharn's tanks, and seemed—if anything—younger and more vital.

I looked at him, surprised. He knew the answer, had been told a hundred times. "You'll be resettled once we reach Gododdin."

The eolderman had insisted on not going under the ice—as had a few of his fellow village elders. They were afraid of becoming mere cargo.

"Aye," Argo said. "But where? And when?"

"That won't be for me to decide," I told him, watching the few children that remained uniced at their game. They were chasing a hoop—a piece of ductwork salvaged from a supply closet, in truth—with branches they had snapped from one of the section's taller trees.

We had settled them in one of the spin sections, in a place beneath a falsely gleaming sky, in low, cuboid houses on a strand overlooking one of the largest aquaria, a little sea that rose in arcs to either side, reminding me of March Station.

"The Empire," Argo said, squinting. The mass of wrinkles that had

haloed his green eyes had smoothed nearly all away during his time in the tank, but their shadow returned as he glowered at me. “Like as not some shithole bad as Danu, then.”

“I doubt it,” I said, moving to stand at the rail. I felt a flash of annoyance. “The princess won’t allow it.”

A trio of *uthras* scurried along the terrace below us about some cryptic errand, past a little flock of gulls utterly unperturbed by the machines. Two of the boys—the sons of one of Argo’s cousins, as I understood it—sped ahead of the others, driving the wheel before them, laughing and calling out to one another to stop the thing from falling. There was a tree in the center of a cul-de-sac at the end of the terrace, its rail overlooking the false sea. Their goal was to steer the wheel about the tree and shoot it back down the road the other way, to keep it going all the way to the squat, square houses on the other end.

“The princess . . .” Argo said. “Never thought I’d meet one of those. We’re kin, did you know? My people—our clan—we’re descended from Arthur Longhand, who was a son of Sebastian Twelve. Screwed off to the Extras and got himself fixed. He never married, set up out here, back when this was the bleeding edge of space, built himself a little kingdom—thirty, forty women, they say.”

“I’d guessed,” I said. “I had a friend from Danu. His name was William.”

“Like the boy . . .” He knew what had passed in the halls of *Demiurge*. “After the Emperor.”

“Yes.”

Argo moved to join me at the rail, heavy tread on printed stone. “Might we not . . . stay here?”

I felt my eyebrows climb my face, my eyes grow wide. Unable to mask my surprise, I said, “Here?”

“This place . . .” The eolderman nodded at the empty village, the water rising, following the curve of the spin section until it vanished beneath the falsely daylit sky. Away in the distance, the black line of the tram—suspended from the roof by inverse arches—hove nearer. “It’s as fine as

any, and finer than Danu, and a damn sight finer than anywhere the Empire is like to send us.”

“You can’t know that,” I said.

“I don’t have to know that,” the old man—several centuries my junior—said. “Meaning no disrespect to your princess, lord. She’s a fine woman, I’m sure, and lovely as Mother Earth herself, but you and I both know how this thing will go. It’s all promises—better food and leave and schooling, all that—then nothing. They’ll pack us on ice until we don’t thaw right, every last one.”

There was truth in the eolderman’s words.

“Argo,” I said, facing the man square, “this is a warship. You know where we’re going, and better than most now what we’re up against.”

“Aye,” he said, “and you’ve been straight with me. Straighter’n any lord I’ve known. And this place . . . it’s mighty queer—those iron hands. But you hear that?”

There was nothing. Nothing but the waves. Distantly a gull cried. The children were unaccountably silent, their voices thrown, perhaps, some other way by the buffeting wind.

The gulls. The waves. The quiet.

Do you know, my boy, that we live on a truly beautiful world?

There was beauty, even in the bowels of that black ship.

“That’s peace,” Argo said. “We can have it here, and it ain’t cold as hell.” He crossed his arms. “You’re a lord, and we’ve none. Danu’s gone, and Count Olander with it—not that he ever gave a fly’s fart about us. And you’ve been good to us.”

I turned away. “I led you all to slaughter.”

“I ain’t no fool,” Argo said. “You tried to save us, I know that. Only the enemy . . .” He shook his head, let out a shuddering breath. “I seen a lot of horrible things in my time, lord, only . . .”

The children were on the return circuit of their journey, whooping as they came, brandishing sticks like swords.

The gulls. The waves. The laughter.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” I said at last. “The way they just . . . rebound?”

Move on as if nothing terrible had happened?”

Argo followed my eyes. “Aye, lord. It is.” We both stood there, silent a while, watching. “Heard your daughter bounced back.”

I peered at the other man with one eye. “She’ll be all right.”

“Word is she got it like the others,” Argo said. “Possessed, like.”

I didn’t say anything.

“They say she is . . . herself again,” Argo said.

“She is,” I said.

Argo chewed his tongue. “Why her and not the others?”

Did he think we had some secret cure? That we were withholding it? I shook my head. “I don’t rightly know,” I said. “We . . . *think* it’s because she died.” It was hard to speak of. “She was dead for minutes before we revived her.”

“Then . . . might the others be clear once they awake from fugue?”

In truth, I believed that it had been Cassandra’s experience *in* death that had saved her, not death alone. I had not been freed from Ushara’s clutches when I entered fugue after Sabratha, had been freed only by Ragama. It had been Valka who freed Cassandra’s spirit. I could not give the eolderman false hope.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“I see.” He combed his beard with his hands. “But there must be a way. This ship . . .” He cast his gaze up at the false sky, at the tram track sliding overhead. “I never thanked you. For the eyes. See better than the old ones, to tell the truth.”

“You needn’t thank me,” I said. “I only wish I could save the rest.”

“Still, it seems to me that their best hope is here, with you,” Argo said. “We can work, my people and me. I’m not asking for charity. I know this here ship, it looks after itself, but there must be something we can—”

“This is a *warship*, Argo,” I said again, more forcefully. “*The* warship. We’re sailing to Gododdin, to the muster of the fleet. The Cielcin are following us. There will be a battle there unlike anything in human history. *The* battle. You won’t be safe with us.”

“Way I see it,” the eolderman said, “there’s nowhere safer, after what I

saw.”

“I . . .” I hesitated to answer him.

“I am certain your princess is a fine woman,” the eolderman said, “but I’d as soon not trust my people’s future to her word, or the word of any lord.”

I bridled. “*I* am a lord, eolderman.”

“Begging your pardon, lord,” Argo said, giving the truth to my rejoinder even as he argued with it, “you’re something more. I heard the stories all my life. I never believed them, but what you did, back home on Danu.”

“You were blind,” I said.

“But I ain’t no fool!” he said, and it was his turn to repeat himself. “I talked to my people. What you did, fighting that . . . *thing*. What your girl did—” He broke off, hissing. “If anyone can save us, it’s you.”

The rolling hoop struck the side of a low building, a glancing blow. The ring fell, and the boys and girls overtook it.

“There’s room here, enough,” said Argo. “Your man, Edouard, he said this ring is ten miles across. I reckon its half that forward to back. Let us stay here, out of your way, leastways until you find someplace better to put us.”

“You misunderstand me,” I said, and turned to look at the man. “Where I’m going . . . I’m not sure there’ll be any coming back.”

CHAPTER 43

OF RAPTORS AND WORMS

“ORPHAN TELLS ME WE’LL need to drop out of warp soon,” I said to young Albé as we walked, following one of the deep, longitudinal corridors from the docking bays back toward the forward section, where we were due to meet with Lin. “Our fuel reserves are bottoming out.”

Edouard frowned. “Why weren’t we told about this sooner?”

We’d not refueled—not needed to refuel, it seemed—since taking possession of *Demiurge*. Massive as the ship was, its reserves were truly great. I had seen them a time or two, on the very rare occasion I’d ventured so far astern: cells mighty as ships in themselves, all mounted in vacuum, visible through high, narrow windows radiating from the round portal of the access umbilical like the rays of the sun.

“I get the impression that Orphan did not think the information of any consequence,” I said. “At the very least, this will give Captain Kvaran and his people a chance to debark.”

Edouard made a face. “You know they’re a security risk.”

“I do,” I said. “But I cannot hold them, and besides . . . the Tavrosi are no threat. They’d as soon have nothing to do with the wider galaxy.”

“You may be right,” said he.

“They don’t know about *Astrophage*,” I said. “And even if they did, they would not tell the Chantry.”

“No,” said Edouard. “But they might be caught by the Cielcin. You know the risks we run dropping out of warp.”

I chewed my tongue, watched the men go by. “I do. But those risks are substantially lower than those associated with our *arriving at our destination*.”

“The Watchers are sure to be scouring space between Danu and

Gododdin,” Edouard said. “If they manage to catch Kvaran and his people . . .”

“You’re talking about tens of thousands of cubic light-years,” I said. “They’re not omniscient, and we’re not on a direct route. Kvaran will be safe as soon as he and his can get to warp.” The soldiers had gone round a side passage, leaving the two of us alone in the hall. In a lower voice, I said, “You and I both know the risks are primarily bound to Cassandra and myself, in any event. It is us they want.”

Edouard nodded.

“The ship’s defenses should be adequate to conceal us,” I continued. “And Kvaran and his people should only be exposed for an hour . . . maybe two.”

“Won’t they recognize the ship, though?” Edouard asked. “They can see the outer shell, seemingly.”

“Maybe.” I did not really understand. The geometries, the physics, the science of it all. “Maybe if they look directly at us, but think: If they can see across the light-years, we must look like a mote of dust to them. So long as that mote of dust behaves *like* a mote of dust . . . why pay it any mind?”

The younger man rubbed his eyes—lifting his spectacles in the process—and resumed his walk. “Old Gog and Magog should have warned us about the refueling.”

“Gog and Magog?” I arched my eyebrows.

Abashed, Edouard studied his boots.

“Orphan *did* warn us,” I said. “It just did. I . . .” I hesitated, at once cognizant of the fact that Orphan could hear us then and there, if it had a mind. “Do you distrust the creature?”

“I . . .” Edouard hesitated. He had spent more time with Orphan than any man alive save myself alone, his task having been the creature’s careful guard and study. “I don’t know. There’s much to do with the operation of this ship I just don’t understand. It’s not a normal vessel, is it?” He fell silent, perhaps aware himself of the ship’s internal cameras. “How are we to refuel? This thing must drink an ocean of—”

I could hear his comm chime, saw the indicator flicker at his wrist.

Edouard froze mid-step, hand going to the patch behind his ear. My own comm ignited an instant later, and a voice I barely recognized said, “Lord Marlowe, A2, you’re needed down by *Ascalon*. There’s been a . . . situation.”

“Taran?” Edouard asked. “A2 here. Report?”

“Is it Cassandra?” I asked. The reference to *Ascalon* was like a blade of ice in my belly. Both Cassandra and Selene had retained their rooms aboard *Ascalon*—as I had—rather than settle into one of Kharn’s suite of apartments in the ship itself. Had something happened to Cassandra? Surely if Ushara had made herself known, the soldiers would have sounded a general alarm.

“No, lord,” said Taran. “It’s the Pale.”

“Ramanthanu?” I was surprised. I had left the captain to monitor Cassandra. Her shadow, despite her objections. “What’s going on?”

“There was a fight. Them and the birdos. Three of Annaz’s men are dead.”

Edouard’s eyes snapped to my face.

Ushara.

Cassandra’s had not been the only mind she’d touched, and though we’d sealed the refugees and affected soldiers in icy sleep, there were others, minds she had touched but not lingered in.

“Where are they now?” I asked, already hurrying. “Are they still fighting?”

“No, lord,” Taran said, “we’re holding things down. Pale put down their swords when we ordered them to, but the bird boys want to tear the two of them apart.”

“We’re on our way.”

. . .

Ascalon was berthed in one of the myriad docking bays that ran along *Demiurge*’s equator. The little ship stood upon its landing peds in the

middle of the vast, echoing space, gleaming black and gold against the mirrored darkness of the bay.

Edouard had radioed for reinforcements—human reinforcements—as we went, but we arrived first, and I pressed ahead, not waiting for their arrival. I could hear the sounds of struggle from the hold.

“That’s enough!” a man’s voice rang out. “I said that’s far enough, feather-head! Get down!”

The sound that answered him seemed to issue from depths of the Jurassic, a high, keening scream. It was an Irchtani war cry.

I took the ramp in bounds, leaped into the hold, sword unkindled in my hand.

A small knot of men—led by Taran and Sahak—held the rear door, lances leveled. Before them—between them and myself—a mob of Irchtani stood, hopping, shuffling nearer the doors on their clawed feet, holding guns of their own.

“You will move!” said one high, Irchtani voice. “You will hand *unaan* over to us. They have drawn blood. Blood of Ishaan Irchtani. Blood must pay!”

“Annaz!” I recognized the voice, and was surprised to find him here, at the head of his men, his mob. “What is the meaning of this?”

The chief of my Irchtani turned—and the heads of his throng with him, save those in the fore, nearest Sahak and Taran.

“Justice!” the birdman said, and I saw he held his *zitaa* in one scaled hand. “Justice for my people. For Ishaan Irchtani. For Anaaki. Bahaamuz. Justice for Inamax.”

“Inamax?” I said. I had tasked Lieutenant Inamax—alongside Ramanthanu—with keeping watch on Cassandra. And where was Cassandra?

“*Eneemira Hakaaro*,” Annaz said.

Gone to hell.

“The Cielcin killed them?”

“They killed!” Annaz said, and the words were taken up by his flock.

“They killed! They killed!”

“They killed Inamax and the others?” I asked, looking round. “Where are the bodies?”

“Up inside, lord!” said Sahak. “Marno’s got them both locked in the cubiculum up top—for their good and ours.”

“They must die!” Annaz said. “Blood pays for blood. Only blood!”

“Blood! Blood!”

I took a step nearer the horde. “Where is my daughter?”

“In her place!” Taran said. “She was sleeping.”

I shut my eyes. I could not rule out the Watcher’s influence, but that Cassandra had not been a part of matters was a small comfort.

“Kithuun-Annaz,” I said. “Stand your men down.”

The chiliarch’s head turned almost all-around. “*Bashanda!* No!”

“I said stand your men down, Annaz!”

“My men are dead!” the chieftain said. “Good men! Killed by those—*things.*” It hopped where it stood, coming round to face me, clawed pinions flapping. “I will have justice! We will have! You must give!”

I stepped forward, *into* the mob of feathered warriors. “Will you strike me, chieftain?” I asked, still holding the unkindled sword in my hand. “Do you think you can?”

Annaz cocked his head, peered unblinking with one huge, dark eye, but he did not speak.

“Have you forgotten who I am? What I am to you? To your people? Have you forgotten the oath I swore upon the bones of my friend, Udash Vaanshakril?”

Silence.

“You will have justice,” I said, “but you will have *human* justice, and human justice demands I speak to the Cielcin.”

“But they are Cielcin,” the chiliarch said.

“They have served me loyally,” I said. “For many years. As have you.” I laid a white hand upon the beast-man’s shoulder. “Should I throw you away without question, were your positions reversed?”

The bird’s narrow shoulders slumped—so human an expression.

Annaz said nothing.

“Take your men away,” I said. “Justice wants peace.”

Just then, the inner door opened, and the face I had most looked for appeared behind Sahak’s visored one. She dressed in close-fitting Marlowe blacks, her tunic slit from the waist on either side, her left sleeve rolled and pinned. She had eschewed her *mandyas*, wore only her shield-belt—its curtain active, coruscating in the air about her hard-eyed face. Her blade—like mine—was unkindled in her hand.

“Cassandra!” I said. She should not have been armed.

“I heard fighting?” Her dark hair fell across her face like a shadow.

Edouard injected himself. “The Cielcin and the Irchtani. It’s in hand.”

“Three of the birds are dead,” I said.

Three? Cassandra mouthed the word, scowling as she did so. “I told you,” she said. “Abba, I told you.”

I ignored her. It had been decades since Sabratha. Decades since Ramanthanu had sworn allegiance to me with the survivors of Muzugara’s band. *Decades*. And nothing in all that time. Nothing but loyal service.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” I said. To Cassandra. To Edouard. To the men on the door. “Where are the bodies?”

“Up in the mess,” said Sahak.

“And Princess Selene?”

“In your cabin,” the man said. “That praetorian of hers, he holed her up. She was never in any danger. The xenos, they were all in the mess. I’m sorry, my lord. I should have kept them apart.”

“You can’t have known,” I said. “Let me by.”

The sound of boots on the ramp behind caught my attention, and looking back I saw the reinforcements Edouard had called for arriving. Young Albé went to direct them. It fell to them to disperse the mob of Irchtani that still stood in the hold. “You said Ramanthanu surrendered peaceably?”

“Gave me its sword itself,” Taran said. “Other one, too.” From his tone of voice, I knew he could hardly believe what he was saying as he said, “To tell the truth, it’s the birdos as gave us all the trouble.”

Cassandra’s eyes narrowed, and I restored my sword to its place on my belt as I went my way between Sahak, Taran, and herself. Another man—

coifed but not helmeted—stood just inside the door, clutching his stunner. He saluted as I appeared. “Got them in the cubiculum, top floor.”

“I know where it is,” I said, flustering the poor man. I took the stairs two at a time, passing the place where Prince Alexander’s assassin once had nearly taken my life.

“Abba, what is going on?” Cassandra’s words—and her feet—chased me up the stairs.

I didn’t answer her, lingered in the hall by the door to the mess. Three bodies lay on the floor of the chamber, watched over by a pair of Legion men.

Inamax . . . it was an unjust end for such a one. The others, Anaaki and Bahaamuz, I did not know, but Inamax—he had been Annaz’s right hand. His lieutenant. He had served us well, and proved instrumental in the fight against Kedron aboard *Demiurge*.

There would be time to mourn, time for the rites.

Cassandra and I mounted the stairs to the upmost floor. Alone for a moment, I rounded on my daughter, moving so fast she recoiled on the landing. I said nothing, inhaled sharply as I pressed her back against the wall. Her hand rose, face opening in confusion and alarm.

“Anaryan?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Abba?”

“Is it you?”

“Is what me?” she asked, batting my hand aside. Realizing, she stiffened, face growing dark. “Oh.”

“I have to be sure.”

“Abba, it’s me,” she said, scowl worsening. “Are you going to distrust me the rest of my life?”

I hadn’t distrusted her for an instant, not until this. If she was innocent—if she was herself—she would have to forgive me. If she were guilty . . .

. . . how would I know?

I cocked my head, studied her with the eyes the god had given me, looked across time, at the faces—the infinite, shifting faces—of my

daughter staring back at me. Nowhere in trackless infinity did I see even the hint of that hideous smile, or feel the bite of her sword in my breast.

And my heart told me there was nothing, that here was only my daughter.

Tell your father he was right . . .

I let her go. "I'm sorry," I said. "I had to be sure."

"You really think it's . . . her?"

"It's possible," I said, looking past her to the stairs above. "Stay sharp, girl. There's something . . ." My voice trailed off, and I shook my head. "Come now."

I mounted the steps to the upmost level, where a quartet of men—HAPSIS veterans, all—stood on the door to the cubiculum. At our approach, they visibly relaxed, leaning on lances. Their leader, an unmasked decurion with a square, bronze face, bent slightly at the waist, smiled. "Lord Marlowe," he said, "Lady Marlowe, are we glad to see you."

"Marno?" I asked, recalling the name Sahak had used.

"Aye, lord, that's me." He turned, eyed the door behind as though it might shoot him in the back. "Pale are in there. Not sure what happened . . ."

"They went crazy, so the birds tell it," said one of the others, voice flattened by his suit comms. "Attacked the bird boys when they were all in the mess."

Cassandra interjected. "What about the ship's internal cameras?"

"We haven't looked," Marno said. "Hasn't been time."

"Ramanathanu didn't say anything?" I asked.

The four men all looked at one another, variously shrugged or shook their heads. "Not to me," said one, eliciting a fusillade of responses from the others, ending with Marno, who spread his hands.

"Understood," I said. "Let me in."

The men drew away from the door, turned their lances inward. "Want us in with you?" Marno asked.

"That won't be necessary, Decurion," I said in reply. "Hold the door."

The door—a slim, black portal—slid open to either side, parting down

the middle, and at once I was greeted by a pair of inhuman faces, black-eyed and white as skulls. Ramanthanu was on its feet, standing between Otomno and the door. Otomno was seated, curled on the floor halfway down the long, narrow chamber.

“*Ba-Aeta-doh*,” Ramanthanu said, and seeing me, knelt.

“What have you done?” I asked the captain in its own language.

Otomno flinched, looked sharply away.

There was blood—black as ink—upon the floor of the cubiculum. Only then did I realize that Ramanthanu was bleeding. The Pale captain’s left arm was bleeding where Irchtani talons had found a weakness in its armor.

“You . . .” it said, speaking Galstani to my surprise, “you are here . . . kill us?”

“What?” I asked. Cassandra shifted at my back, and I could feel by the way she moved that she was angling her sword arm to face the lop-horned xenobite.

“*E Egazimn!*” said Otomno from the rear.

Like Egazimn.

“Egazimn gave itself to your gods,” I said. “It tried to kill us.”

“You were quick to try and save your own people!” Otomno said. “This one you are with. He nearly killed you, and here he stands free.”

Ramanthanu hissed, turning its head to direct the sound and its bared fangs at its sole compatriot. Otomno fell silent, cowed by its superior. “*Caihanarin ba-koun’ta . . .*” it said. “I have no gods but Utannash, *ba-Aeta-doh*. There are no gods but Utannash. I have seen this thing. Time and time again. I know what is *kulan*, is *truth*.”

I surveyed the both of them: the captain standing, its slave seated, knees pulled to its chin. Otomno’s accusation stung me. I had not saved Egazimn, been able to save any of their number. But two of them remained.

Only two.

“The fact remains,” I said, sliding into Cielcin so as to be certain I’d not be misunderstood. “Egazimn was lost. I could not have saved it.”

“You saved this!” Otomno thrust a finger at Cassandra. “You were quick

enough to save your kind! We are *yours*. We gave ourselves to you! You have given us nothing but destruction!”

The creature’s words astonished me—not because they were false, indeed, their truth was like pale fire—but because Otomno ought not to have spoken them. I was its lord, its *aeta*. Its obedience should have been unquestioning, even unto death. But Cielcin did rebel, from time to time.

Ramanthanu raised its face to the roof above, baring its throat to me in the process. “I have seen you defy the gods,” it said, “seen you fight them with your hands, seen you stand in two places at once . . .”

“You’re right,” I said. “Maybe I could have saved Egazimn.”

“You mean to kill us!” Otomno said. “Ramanthanu, he says this thing! He says you will lead us to destruction.”

I spoke over the creature then. “You are going there yourself at the moment.” I could read the confusion on Cassandra’s face, but there was no time to translate for her. Not then. “Tell me what happened.”

“The *eijana*!” Otomno spat, using the Cielcin word for the Irchtani. “They attacked us!”

“That is not what they say,” I said.

“They tried to dominate Otomno,” Ramanthanu said, four nostrils flaring. “Otomno is mine!”

“I ordered them to help you watch Cassandra!” I shouted, stepping forward.

Spurred by the sound of her name, Cassandra said, “What?”

I waved her back. “Those were my orders. They spoke with my voice.”

Clear membranes snicked across Ramanthanu’s eyes. “You say those *things* are our betters? Those animals? You would set them over us?”

I cast about, searching for the right words. “I would set you both under me.”

Ramanthanu blinked translucently again, cocked its unbalanced head. “But who shall stand above the other?” it asked. “It should be me. I was victorious.”

“*Tuka ne*?” I asked. “You? You slew the Irchtani?”

“I did!” Otomno snarled. “I killed them, for the honor of my master.”

I shut my eyes, for all the good it did. Well I read the fury and defiance in Otomno's eyes, the light in them like distant suns. It would have been better if the creature had denied it. I might have spared its life.

I would have to kill it.

"Your master?" I asked. The Cielcin had used the word *akrana*, not *aeta*. It did not mean me. But it had not said *ichakta*, either. *Akrana* was something else. "Ramanthanu?"

"I would not see him shamed!" Otomno said, drawing its knees ever tighter to its chest—a curiously feminine gesture.

The captain was silent.

"Abba, what is all this?" Cassandra asked.

"A moment," I said to her. Ramanthanu's injured arm yet wept blood upon the floor, while Otomno—not armored as its captain had been—was covered in ragged lacerations, deep, black cuts on arms and face all weeping blood like ink. To Otomno, I said, "You killed them? All three?"

"Two," Otomno said, holding up its thumb and first finger, as was Cielcin custom.

"I took the third," Ramanthanu said. "The captain. Their *ichakta*."

My heart turned to ash, to dust.

I would have to slay them both. To avenge the slain Irchtani, to preserve peace in my ranks. Yet by Cielcin logic, had not their actions been self-defense, believing the Irchtani meant to overmaster them?

"You killed Inamax?" I asked Ramanthanu.

The creature twitched its head in the affirmative. "We are not hers, not theirs. We are *yours*," it said. "Yours to command."

"What did they ask you to do?" I asked.

Otomno interjected. "The *eijana*, they say 'Cielcin must go below! Watch doors!' They order us to obey, as though they were our *aeta*. It was a humiliation!"

A heavy weight lay on me.

"The Irchtani gave them orders," I said in standard, turning to Cassandra. "The Cielcin didn't like that. They said their orders must come

from me, saw the Irchtani trying to order them around as an attempt to assert rank.”

Cassandra’s brows furrowed. “What?”

“I know,” I said.

“It was . . . for your sake, *ba-Aeta-doh*,” said Ramanthanu, speaking in halting standard. “It was treason, what they did.”

That drew my attention, and I peered up into the monstrous captain’s face. “*Qoqoryr ne?*” I asked, “Treason? How is it treason?”

“It is your place to command,” Ramanthanu said. “We are yours. Not theirs. They would steal your right. Your claim.”

Again, my eyes pressed closed. The Cielcin had seen the Irchtani’s orders that they should go and guard the ramp not only as an attempt on the part of the birds to assert control over them, but as an attack against my claim on the two Cielcin. I let out a long, slow breath.

“You attacked first?” I asked.

“We attacked!” Otomno answered, almost defiant. There was no word for yes.

“They want you dead,” I said. “Both of you. Blood for blood.”

“Let them try!” Ramanthanu snarled.

“You should not have killed them,” I said.

Ramanthanu blinked. “They challenged us, challenged you.”

“*Rakanyi o-kousun!*” I said. “They are mine, as you are mine! They were not yours to kill.”

The Cielcin looked down on me, face wholly unreadable. “They defied you!”

“They *asked* you to watch the door,” I said. “That is nothing.”

“You expect us to serve *them*?” the captain’s lips peeled back, revealing its translucent fangs.

“I expect you both to serve me!” I shouted, and hammered the beast in its chest for emphasis. “You say that you are my servant! Act like it!” Ramanthanu fell back a step. I stepped forward, claiming the ground it vacated. “You think I want my servants fighting? Killing one another? We needed those warriors.”

The look on Ramanthanu's face—I think that I have seen enough of Cielcin emotion to recognize their anger when I see it. The way the eyes narrowed, nostrils stretched. Its fists were clenched, as though it thought to strike me.

"You will kill us," Otomno said. "Like you killed Egazimn. You will kill us for *them*. Blood for blood. That is what you said. *Darathare bi ti-darathare bi ush*."

Ramanthanu clutched its wounded arm. "We are all that remains," it said. "And you will kill the others."

We had not spoken of it, not in all the weeks and months since I had laid out my plan. Neither creature had challenged me, neither questioned.

"I will kill them," I said. There was no Cielcin word yes.

"And you will kill us," Ramanthanu said. "For those . . . things? For the *eijana*?"

"They expect it of me," I said, and paused, struck by something Otomno had said.

Darathare bi ti-darathare bi ush.

Had I misheard?

"Three lives for three lives?" I looked at the seated creature. "Three?"

Ramanthanu placed itself between Otomno and myself. "*Ba-Otomno-kih . . . svarasasa . . .*"

Otomno . . . surrenders? But no, not quite. The word was similar to *surrenders*, but . . .

"Surrenders?" I said, looking from Ramanthanu to Otomno and back again. "Surrenders?" I looked at Cassandra. She understood less than I. I retreated the step I had gained. Understanding came like a thunderclap, like an earthquake. I swayed where I stood.

My eyes found Ramanthanu's. My stomach was a chasm. "Yours?"

"Abba, what is it?" Cassandra asked, coming to my side. "What did it say?"

I did not take my eyes from Ramanthanu as I answered her. "Otomno is gravid," I said.

"Gravid?" Cassandra sounded horrified. "Pregnant?"

Still looking the lop-horned captain in the face, I asked, “Yours?”

“*Ba-eka*,” it said.

Mine.

For once in my life, I could think of nothing to say. A child. A Cielcin child. Ramanthanu’s child, and Otomno’s. The little creature had arisen in the captain’s womb, and—being superior—Ramanthanu had implanted it in its underling.

“How long?” I asked at last, speaking my own tongue.

“It will be born before we reach Gododdin,” the captain said.

I could hardly speak.

“*Biqau n o-okarin’na ne?*” Otomno asked, and the creature’s crabbed posture took on a new meaning. It was protecting the little thing in its belly.

“A Cielcin *child*?” Cassandra could not conceal the disgust in her voice. “Really?”

I looked at her, back at the Cielcin.

“You have done me good service,” I said, speaking my own tongue that Cassandra might understand. “Both of you. Good service . . .” I met their inky gaze. “You know what it is I must do?” I asked the question again in Cielcin, for Otomno’s benefit.

Ramanthanu answered. “You will destroy the Prophet and his gods, and all his servants with him. My people.”

“*Ba-cielucin*,” I said. “Utannash has ordered me to destroy your people. Your Prophet. Your princes. Your gods. You know where it is we are going? What it is I intend to do?”

Ramanthanu nodded—the human gesture, not the Cielcin one. “Yes.”

The human word.

“And still you would serve me?” I asked.

Ramanthanu looked to its companion, its sole companion . . . its mate. “You . . . are a prophet yourself, the prophet of Utannash. I have seen it.” The captain sank to its knees as it spoke, and pressed its ear to the floor in token of submission. “If Utannash has ordered the death of my people, I cannot stop it. If my death will serve—if our deaths will serve—then I offer them.”

I knew what was required, what I must do, and—lifting one booted foot—pressed the heel into the side of the giant’s face, reasserting my right.

I could kill them. Would not.

“What are you going to do?” Cassandra asked. “About the birdmen?”

I did not turn to look at her, did not take my foot from Ramanathanu’s head. “I will talk to them,” I said. “I will make them understand.”

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CHAPTER 44

THE SERPENTS IN OUR MINDS

A CHILD. MY MIND still was reeling. *A Cielcin child.*

I could not kill them, I knew. Whatever they had done, the child had not done. It was innocent. An innocent. I could commute their sentence, wait until the child was born. But could I raise it without them? I knew too little of their ways, their biology. How did one care for a Pale child? Feed it? Teach it? No, no I could not kill the parents. I might have killed only Ramanthanu, but I needed the one to check the other. Otomno mistrusted me, and without its master—its lover, its *akrana*—I would have to kill Otomno before long.

But justice wanted peace, as I had said to the Irchtani, and peace demanded satisfaction. The Irchtani had been wronged. My servants had wronged them. My left hand feuded with my right, my house stood divided. I could not give the Irchtani the justice they sought, the justice they deserved.

Did they deserve it?

Could I give them peace?

The birds had gone by the time Cassandra and I returned to the hold outside, but Marno led us to the place they had taken them: a long, empty hall whose far wall was dominated by windows that looked in on one of *Demiurge's* fisheries. There dark things moved, the shapes of kelp and of fishes.

Seeing my entrance, the birdmen—who had been huddled together, whispering or asleep—arose and shifted on stiff legs. The men guarding them stirred, disturbed by the Irchtani's motion as the kelp was disturbed by the passage of the fish.

I found Annaz standing amidst their throng. He hopped forward, his

feathers stood on end.

But he did not speak.

I knew *I* must.

What could I say? The Irchtani wanted vengeance. Blood for blood. They deserved it, for Otomno and Ramanthanu had attacked them seemingly without provocation. But from the Cielcin perspective, they *had* been provoked. Attacked.

Both parties were guilty, and neither understood their offense.

How then could justice be satisfied?

I thought I knew.

"I have decided," I said, felt the tension, the ripple as it passed through the feathered xenobites. "I will not kill the *unaani*."

Annaz let out a low croaking sound, his beak *clacking*. "Why?"

"There is another," I said. "Otomno is with child. The *unaan* carry their children within as we do. The child is not guilty."

"But it is *theirs*!" said Annaz, raising one clawed pinion, three taloned fingers extended. "Three were taken. Three must be taken. It is fate there are three to pay."

"Three is all they have," I said.

"What does that matter?"

"Should they pay with *everything* for your loss?" I asked.

One of the others let out a piercing cry, and at once countless huge wings beat the air, filling the hall with a buffeting that tossed my hair and cloak. Beside me, Cassandra flinched, sword unkindled in her hand.

"*Haakaash! Haakaash!*" the warriors cried, and "*Suujos! Suujos!*"

Death and justice.

"Inamax is dead!" said Annaz, hopping forward. "Pale ones killed him. Killed Anaaki and Bahaamuz. They want justice!"

"They will have it," I said, hands raised, spread before me. "Did I kill Udax Vaanshakril for what he did to me?" I asked, advancing on the birdmen. "Should I have?"

Annaz twitched in agitation, shifted his weight from one clawed foot to the next.

“My mercy spared his life, and the lives of your folk. By that mercy, your people became mine.” I was standing right in front of Annaz, the others closing in around. I was surrounded by beak and claw. “Ramanthanu and Otomno are mine, and their child is mine. I brought them here, as I brought you. I am responsible for them, as I am responsible for you. It is *my* fault that this happened.” My hands were at my sides. “If you must have blood, take mine. You will not have theirs.”

“Abba!” Cassandra exclaimed, aghast.

I ignored her.

I studied every fine-feathered face. Green. Black. Bronze.

There was no shadow of the Watcher on them.

Theirs was honest rage.

Annaz hopped forward a step. How small it was, half a child, coming no taller than my ribs. But its beak was vicious, cruel, and curved. Its talons each were knives. It could have torn me to pieces, disemboweled me as the eagle Prometheus.

“Why do you deny our right?” asked he.

“Your *right*?” I echoed, glaring down at him. “Do you think me a fool, *Kithuun*?”

“*Bashanda*?” The birdman’s eyes were wide as eggs, black as jet.

“We are few,” I said. “There are so few left I can trust. I need Ramanthanu and Otomno. I need you and your men. We are returning to Gododdin, where we will be surrounded by enemies. I have need of every one of you.”

It was utterly silent in the hold. Only the fish and the kelp beyond the windows moved. The birdmen all were frozen, astonishment in their beady eyes. Not understanding their shock, I said, “You will have justice for Inamax, but it will come in time, with the repayment I owe your people for Udash and the others of your race who have died in my service.” I focused on the chiliarch once more. “Do you think I have forgotten my oath?”

“*Bashanda . . .*” said the *kithuun*, beak open. “How is this possible?”

Birdsong—and not the words of men—issued from his throat.

But I understood him plain.

“He speaks our tongue . . .” said another.

“I can understand him!”

“He sings!” said a third. “He sings!”

No human could speak the language of the Irchtani. Not rightly. Not well. For while we humans possess the one set of cords only, the Irchtani possess two—just like their false cousins, our birds. In speaking, one set formed the words, while the other produced a fine music whose notes and tonal changes informed the meaning of what was said.

I could not imitate it. No man could.

And yet in the days that followed, the Irchtani there present all claimed they heard the music of their home, of Immuz of the Irchtani, in my voice. The Irchtani drew back in amazement, eyes wide with wonder. Many bent at the waist as, lacking knees, they could not kneel.

“*Bashan Iseni . . .*” said Annaz, bowing himself. “*Bashan-za’an-Bash.*”
Higher Being. Higher than High.

I touched his shoulder, and he flinched at the contact. “You need not bow,” I said, “only trust me. You will have your reward.”

I meant every word. Every word. But what I promised them then is no longer in my power to give—was only in my power for the barest instant, as giants mark time. The men of Immuz, those princes of all that go on wings, have not reinherited their world, have not joined the sons of Earth as brothers in the sea of stars.

One day, perhaps.

• • •

“I don’t know why you do it.” Cassandra glowered at me. “Why you stand up for those creatures.”

“Ramanthanu and Otomno have served me faithfully—”

“They are *Cielcin*, Abba,” Cassandra snarled, thumped me in the chest. “We *need* the Irchtani—they are hundreds. *Noyn jitat!* We do not need the Pale! Have you forgotten Sabratha?”

“I forget nothing.”

“Then why are they alive?” She raised her hand again to prod me in the breastbone. I caught her wrist.

I had taken her back to *Ascalon*, to her quarters on the little ship—a gentle but present reminder that she was still under observation. Ushara had shown no signs of manifestation, but it was early yet. It was as private a setting for this confrontation as was possible.

“Because,” I said, not releasing her, “they are something different. Something *new*.”

She could not know, could never understand, how hard I had fought to cross the gulf between our kinds. She knew but little of the quest for Vorgossos, of the peace I had tried to forge, the peace Titus Hauptmann and Bassander Lin—and Aranata Otiolo—had dashed. That I had abandoned. In Ramanthanu—to a lesser extent, in Otomno—and in their child, that hope for peace lived anew.

“Whatever they are is not worth the Irchtani,” Cassandra said.

“I have not lost the Irchtani.”

“For now!” she said. “But Abba, they killed three of them, and you did nothing!”

“I have not done nothing.”

“Yes, you have!” she said. “You pay them in *promises*, and they accept them because they love you.”

She was right. And yet I could not deviate from the path. I needed Annaz and his men. I needed Ramanthanu. “It’s the child . . .” I said at last, “their child. I have to hope . . .”

Cassandra gripped her shoulder. “You want them to be something they’re not.”

“Yes,” I said, not blinking. That was what I wanted. Precisely what I wanted.

“You won’t domesticate them.”

“I’m not trying to *domesticate* them,” I said, and it was my turn to glower. “I am trying to set them free.”

One might have tasted the charge on the air then. The dry crackling. The

bite of ozone.

“*Free . . .*” Cassandra turned away, sank onto the edge of her bed.

“You saw what the Watchers did to us,” I said. “To the Danuans.”

“To me, you mean?” She would not look at me. “Abba, I almost killed you. I almost . . . I wanted to . . .”

“That’s enough,” I said.

“She made me—”

“I know,” I said. “But you’re free now, too.” I smiled, but she still would not look at me. “Their race has been under the Watchers for tens of thousands of years. That’s what made them what they are. Eons of co-evolution. They’ve been so long without choosing, they’ve forgotten how.”

Cassandra’s eyes were fixed on some point in the matte-black wall, some defect or scratch only she could see—or on nothing at all. Hers were the eyes of an addict, of a corpse, hollow and impossibly distant. “I chose,” she said, and sucked her teeth.

“I know,” I said.

“I wanted it, I . . .” She sat so still it seemed almost that even her lips were still. “I was so angry.”

I went to her, but stopped two paces from her side. From the brittleness of her posture, I knew it would be a mistake to go to her. “I hated them,” I said. “The Cielcin, I mean. I hated them for a long time. Most of my life . . . but now I pity them.”

“Do you pity me?” Her words struck the wall like drops of rain, fell past me and burst.

The lamp in the ceiling threw my shadow at my feet. “You don’t need pity,” I said. “What you need is rest.”

Cassandra shook herself, resembling nothing so much as a jubala smoker coming back to the understanding that time was passing by. “You’re right,” she said, and put her hand to her breast. “I hate when you’re right.”

“No, you don’t,” I said.

“Stop it.” She smiled.

I smiled, too.

“You still don’t understand,” she said. “I *let* her have me.” Her arm

wound tighter, made me think of her mother's arm, of Urbaine's worm crawling, crawling in Valka's mind. "I didn't know. Didn't know what . . . what would happen."

"Anaryan." I was standing over her, standing directly beneath the lamp.

The sound of her name recalled her, and her eyes slid slowly over my face. The last time she had looked up at me like that, it had been with another light in those green eyes—like a fever. I held her gaze then, so long as she would let me. I lay my hand on hers, felt her lurch.

"I understand."

"How can you?" she said. "I should be dead."

I smiled at her.

"Stop it," she said again, having realized what she'd just said, and to whom.

"She is gone, Anaryan," I said. "You are free."

One by one, Cassandra drew her knees to her chin and held herself, shut her eyes at last.

"You are right," I said finally. "I owe the Irchtani more than I can give them. But neither can I kill the Cielcin for what they have done. They are just now learning what it is to be free."

"That does not excuse murder."

"No," I agreed. "But for it to be murder, the killer must have some understanding that what he does is wrong. Ushara had you in thrall less than an hour. The Cielcin evolved in their shadow, lived with them for more than a thousand generations. Can you imagine?" I felt her criticism, her scorn like lightning on the air. "You think me a fool."

"I do."

"You may be right," I said. "We are sailing to Gododdin, daughter. To the end. I do not know what will happen when we get there. But I will do what I set out to do. What he ordered me to do. I will use the *Sun Eater*. I will destroy the Watchers. And Dorayaica. All of them. But I will not destroy Ramanthanu and Otomno. Not for this. If that is foolishness, then I am a fool. But there are those who would caution me to destroy *you*."

Cassandra sat curled on the bed, eyes wide and unblinking. "Maybe you

should.” She smiled, but it was only a smile—albeit one humorless and cold. “She could still be in me.”

“*Non, Anaryan,*” I said, and blinked back tears. “There is no one here but us.”

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CHAPTER 45

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

“FOR WHAT IT’S WORTH,” the princess said, voice rising from the couch behind me, “you did the right thing.”

We’d had this conversation multiple times since the day of the event, but that day had seen the funeral for Otomno and Ramanthanu’s three Irchtani victims. These had been ejected with great ceremony into the black of space, fired into the nameless sun which we had made our anchor.

The Tavrosi had departed as well, shortly thereafter, and with considerably less ceremony. Kvaran and his companions left with hardly a word, the three of them pausing to offer salute in perfect unison before the doors to the tram that would carry them to their ships closed between us.

I never saw them again.

The Cielcin had not been present for the funeral. I had sequestered them, confined them to one of *Demiurge*’s frigate-shuttles, and placed them under guard. This—I had explained—was for their protection, theirs and their coming child’s. The Irchtani had attempted to kill my two Cielcin when they emerged from *Ascalon*, and Edouard’s security detail had had no choice but to stun a dozen of the birds—including Kithuun-Annaz himself.

That had made it easier.

“I did *nothing*,” I said.

“That was the right thing,” Selene said.

I nodded silently, hands behind my back. The light that issued through *Demiurge*’s high windows seemed almost black. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I asked, nodding at the surface: the swirling plasma, dragged through looping arcs ten thousand miles high, the oceans of fire. “I can hardly believe it’s real.”

“Hadrian.”

I looked back, smiled sadly, said, “I hope you’re right.” I returned my gaze to the high windows, to the sun burning beneath us, a vast infinity of fire. I felt as though I could watch it forever.

“Of course I’m right,” she said. “Would it have been better had you’d killed them?”

“Of course not.”

The light dancing about *Demiurge*’s countless spires and towers mingled with the ship’s shields, bathed the whole vessel in aurora, so that it seemed we sailed beneath the surface of a vast and sparkling sea, our towers and buttresses like the fins of some black and beautiful leviathan.

Ramanthanu alone—of all its kind—had shown the will to renounce the Watchers’ hold. It had sworn itself to me, and *through* me to Utannash, the Absolute himself. It had placed its faith, and therefore the faith of all who followed it, in me.

But it was still one of *them*.

But it was a start, and *proof*. Proof that the boy I had been had not been all a fool.

“I feel . . .” How could I say it? “Those Cielcin—both of them—they’re a chance. The best chance their species has.”

She did not ask me *for what*.

“You really think we can do it?” she asked. “Destroy a sun, I mean?” She moved to join me at the window.

“We have the means,” I said, and felt the gravity of those words.

“It doesn’t feel . . . real?” Selene said, standing beside me at last. Her hair glowed in the starlight, red as red, a shining cascade, mirror smooth.

“It shouldn’t be possible. They’re so . . .”

“Eternal,” I finished for her, restoring my attention to the sun below. We passed above a sunspot then, its bright blackness glowing with the fire beneath.

Selene laughed, covered her mouth. “I was going to say *big*,” she said. “How could we do *anything* to something so . . . massive?” She hugged herself, shivering. “It doesn’t seem possible.”

“I don’t pretend to understand any of it,” I said, smiling down at her. “I

am no magus, princess.”

“Are we really to dive *into* the sun?” she asked, fingers at once tight on my arm.

“So Orphan says.” Bringing my face near the glass, I peered up, turning to look at the roof of the tower above. “The shutters are set to come down before too long now, I think.”

The princess craned her neck, tried to see what I had seen. Watching her, I drew back, said, “We’re perfectly safe, the shields are holding. They’ll keep the radiation off.”

“Shouldn’t it be hot?”

“It will be,” I said. “We’re still a few million miles out. It’ll get worse as we get closer.”

“It’s madness,” Selene said.

“The ship is too massive to refuel any other way,” I said. “The Cielcin do something similar. They don’t get nearly as close, use magnetic siphons to take in stellar material. It takes one of their worldships months—years—to convert enough stellar plasma into AM fuel. We save time diving into the sun directly.”

Orphan had taken me to see the collectors, the plasma intakes that lined the rear of the behemoth, their apertures each more than a mile wide. Once opened, these allowed *Demiurge* to flood its fuel tanks with stellar plasma. Hydrogen. Helium. Oxygen. Neon. Argon. Iron. These were sorted, run through the ship’s coiling accelerators to produce the antimatter necessary to drive the ship beyond light.

We would pass through the chromosphere and down into the sun itself, where the collectors would drink of the sun’s very fire.

“We’ll have to make several passes,” I said. “Orphan says the reserves are nearly empty, and we can’t stay *in* the sun itself, not for long.”

“We should be dead already . . .” Selene said, eyes huge, shining in the dim as she looked up at me. “This ship . . . it scares me, but it . . . I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“There’s nothing like it,” I told her.

A column of sunfire thousands of miles high rose like a fountain

hundreds of miles away and ahead, bent up and over us, following channels of force. It should have made a sound, I remember thinking. I watched it go, the grandfather of every thunderbolt little Zeus had ever thrown.

"I fear to return to Gododdin, Selene," I said. "The Empire—the Chantry—they want this ship. Its weapons. Its secrets. They will take it from me if they can." I looked back at her where she sat. How small she seemed . . . "Without your father . . ."

"We're not without my father," she said.

"We soon will be," I said. For all we knew, he was already gone. "He is my only ally at court. The lords fear me. Your brother despises me. The Chantry has killed me once before."

Her face darkened, turned inward, down. "You have me."

"And will you take the throne?" I asked. Seeing her face grow darker still, I softened. "I mean no disrespect, princess. But *you* are no match for the others . . ."

"Then do not return to court. Do not leave this ship. We can stay here . . ."

I spoke over her. "You weren't at Vorgossos," I said. "The Chantry got a strike team on board. They crippled the ship's computers, nearly succeeded in wresting control of the vessel from me." She knew all this, knew, too, about the priests' daimon. "Every day we spend in Gododdin system is a day they will plot to take this ship."

"Then don't let them have it," Selene said. "*You* have it."

"What would you have me do?" I asked, surprised by the iron, the venom on Selene's tongue. "Destroy the Chantry?"

"You don't have to *do* anything," Selene said. "Keep your allies around you. The Jaddians. The Strategos. *My father.*"

"They need the ship," I said. "Not me."

She jabbed me in the chest, her nail a claw. "It is *you* who holds the ultimate power in this war, now. Not my father. Not my brother. Not the Chantry. *You.*" Her eyes were like glittering jewels. "They can defy you only if you let them."

"You know it's not that simple," I said.

“Isn’t it?” Selene asked. “If they try to take this ship from you, you make an example of them.”

“Just a moment ago, you cautioned me against rash action,” I said.

“I cautioned you against killing your friends,” she said. “Not your enemies.”

“I may pay for that, as well,” I said. “The Irchtani have not forgiven me.”

“They worship you,” Selene said. “They’ll move on.”

Her hands had seized the collar of my robe somewhere in the course of our exchange. Her fingers glittered with their rubies and diamonds, the gold of her finery gleaming with reflected starfire, as if those rings would run and drip onto my chest. I felt the sweat bead on the back of my neck afresh, and turned from her face to peer out the window. “Damn them,” I hissed, watching the whorled surface of the sun. “Damn them all . . .”

“What is it?” Selene asked.

I struck the high window with a fist. I left it there. The glass was faintly warm, and I pressed my forehead against it, eyes screwed shut against the darkened light. “We are supposed to be fighting the . . . enemy,” I said. I almost said *the Cielcin*, lately remembered Ramanthanu and Otomno and their little surprise. “Instead we are fighting each other. It seems the Watchers need hardly do anything. We’ll destroy ourselves.”

“We might,” Selene agreed at last. “But we haven’t yet.”

“That’s not for want of trying,” I said.

“Maybe not,” she said, and laid her hand on my shoulder. “But have a little faith.”

“In my fellow man?” I asked.

Selene’s smile was amused. “In some of us,” she said.

“Would that Lorian were here,” I said, and saying so felt a shadow large as any of the dark places on the sun below us pass over me, cast by the smallest man I had ever known. “Him I trust.”

“Then call him.” Selene didn’t hesitate. “Send the telegraph.”

“He won’t answer it,” I said.

“You don’t know that.” She prodded me once more in the chest, glared

down at me. "Send the telegraph."

Lorian . . .

His face seemed to float in the black glass of the window.

This is farewell, Marlowe, he'd said, and pulled the bill of his cap down over his colorless eyes.

My hands made fists.

Lorian . . .

He'd had years, decades to think about Vorgossos. Whatever shock and betrayal he had felt when *Demiurge* fired upon his ship, he'd learned the truth. He had surely forgiven me that much, at least. But Harendotes? The shattering of his Monarchy? His dream?

Time flowed by, ran down toward its final darkness, carrying us both upon its shoulders to whatever end.

Him I trust . . . Did I trust him, even still?

I looked at Selene. The princess had not moved from her place by the window. Her jaw was set, her head tilted, her meaning plain. She had said her piece.

Did I need his forgiveness? It was Kharn Sagara who had deceived him, not me. I had hidden the truth—but I had done so only to protect my people. Cassandra. Selene. Lorian himself. The powers on Latarra had surely perceived him as a creature of dual loyalties, torn between Harendotes and myself, between Monarchy and Empire.

Would he come?

He had to come.

I had just said I trusted him.

"All right," I said. "I'll call him."

We lingered there, in the tower, for a good, long time, watching the star fall ever nearer. The light grew redder, darker as the filter glass polarized further and further still, so that the room was filled with ruby light.

Selene stood beside me, and together we watched the flames rising, the flares arcing overhead like the columns of some cathedral infinitely vast. Before long, *Demiurge* would pass through the chromosphere, dive into that sea of light and fire. Waves of flame, of plasma and molten metal would lap

at our hull, fret our turrets and buttressed spires with tongues of golden fire. I could see us in my mind's eye, our ship like a great, black city sinking into that lake of fire like the palace of Lucifer himself. But we would rise again, wings and towers trailing beads of plasma like threads of gleaming gold. In the days to come, when our accelerators had refined the stellar material and made the antimatter we required, we would plunge in again, engines drinking of the very stars until *Demiurge* had supped her fill.

Only then would we depart, and return to Gododdin.

But first, I had a promise to keep, and a message to send.

• • •

It was dark in the holography suite. All dark, and cold. Standing there, on the plate, it did not feel like we were deep beneath the surface of a sun. Alarms had driven Selene and myself from the tower even as the shutters closed.

At a sign, the machine before me hummed to life, scanning lenses orbiting on their tracks, tracing their careful image as I stood there, head bowed, arms crossed. I might have worn my armor for the occasion, my old uniform. But to do so, I decided, was a kind of trick, a ploy to win Lorian's aid, a manipulation. I wore simple blacks instead: The long tunic jacket belted at the waist and bound with a broad, white sash whose tasseled ends hung nearly to my knee; the trousers neatly turned into the polished boots. My cape fell from my shoulders, black above, white beneath.

The only light—but for the red safety lighting that ran along the periphery of the round room about me—came from the holograph recorder itself.

“Lorian.” For all I knew, the *Mistwalker* was destroyed, and Lorian dead and gone. The little proton in my telegraph array might be tapping its reply to a receiver that was no more.

What could I say?

“I . . . failed,” I said at last, arms wound about my chest, head bowed. “I

tried to kill Dorayaica. The enemy fleet is moving. They're sailing to war. I took a fleet to meet them. I thought to destroy Dharan-Tun and Dorayaica with it. A targeted strike. But it . . . anticipated me. Dharan-Tun was gone by the time we arrived . . ."

I was a child playing at the shores of the sea, throwing bottles to the surf, stuffed with messages mayhap no man would ever read. Lorian would not answer me. He had made that plain at Vorgossos. He might be at warp, bottled himself, lost in his own little bubble universe where my message could never find him.

He might have fallen . . .

Had he returned to Latarra? Found it awash in civil war?

Had there been a battle there? Was he . . . dead?

"Our fleet was more than decimated. The Tavrosi sailed with us. They are all but destroyed . . ." I peered sharply up then, directly into the aperture of the camera that primarily recorded my face. "They sent the Watchers against us. Against the fleet. Lorian, I—" How could I make him understand? I could send him footage, but every second, every instant of material added hours to the time it would take to send the message. "It was terrible. What they did, what they're capable of unleashed . . ." I hadn't even been on the bridge, in the thick of the *real* fighting.

"I am sailing for Gododdin. I will be there in a matter of months. The Emperor is there, along with the whole of the armada. I . . ." I looked away. "I gave the Cielcin their location. They are sailing to Gododdin even now. Dorayaica knows the Emperor is there, and that I am rushing to join him. It will take the bait. It will not waste this opportunity to crush mankind at a stroke. They have the ships. The numbers. They have the Watchers. They have just *beaten me*. Dorayaica believes its victory is assured, but I have the means to stop them . . ."

A little silence then. A breath.

"A weapon," I said. "One forged by the Mericanii of old. It can destroy *a sun*, Lorian. If Dorayaica commits its fleet to an all-out assault upon Gododdin—the whole of its fleet against the whole of ours—I can destroy them. All of them at once. But I cannot do it alone. I need *your* help." I

shifted where I stood. “Lorian, the Emperor is dying. For all I know . . . he may already be dead, in which case I am sailing into the lion’s den . . .”

Another silence. Another breath—this one shuddering.

“I cannot do this alone. I need your help.”

One hand scrabbled blindly for the console at my right. Fingers found the cutoff.

The holograph recorder booth fell dark.

I might have been standing in a tomb, in the bowels of our necropolis beneath the mount at Devil’s Rest. It was so quiet . . . I was alone. Utterly alone in that dimly lighted space, where even the Watchers could not find me.

Let him hear me, I prayed. Let him come.

There was no answer from on high. No word, no breath, no whispered hope.

Let me not stand alone.

Still no answer came. Not there, not then . . . in the darkness of the ship, in the heart of that nameless star . . .

I was alone.

CHAPTER 46

NATIVITY

I COULD HEAR THE beast's screaming from the gangway, its roaring, guttural voice raw with pain. The men on the door stood tensely by, clutching their weapons. It had been they who alerted me, who had contacted the bridge when the noise began. We all knew what it meant, what it must mean, and the knowledge was no comfort.

"Should we call for a medical team?" one guard had asked.

"No," I'd told him, after small conference with Edouard. We'd no medical personnel suited to the task. Not even Kharn's machines could have been of service, programmed as they were to minister to human beings.

And there was no telling what the Cielcin might do. Not the parents.
Not the child.

"Been at it over an hour already," said one of the men on the door.
"Never heard nothing like it, lordship."

"Like two lizards going at it," said the other.

"And you know what that sounds like, Yasin?"

"Like you don't—"

One look was all it took to silence them.

The sound issuing from the open airlock *was* terrible, a rasping, wailing cry, punctuated by sharp, staccato sounds, like breathing, like curses.

"The captain's not come out?" I asked. "It hasn't asked for anything?"

"I've not seen either of them in days," said the man called Yasin. "Just leave the food in the airlock. One of them must come and take it."

"They ain't given us no trouble, lord," said the other.

A particularly long, harsh scream interrupted us. I felt Cassandra tense, and turning found her standing almost on top of me.

I didn't know what to think, what to do, how to react.

There was a Cielcin giving birth on the ship.

It screamed again.

Cassandra's face was white as milk.

"You don't have to come with me," I said to her.

She shook her head, said nothing.

"Don't feel right, do it?" said Yasin. "Pale having babies and all. Feels like they should just . . . I dunno. Crawl out of holes in the ground?"

The other soldier shuddered, shook himself. "I thought they was both men."

"That's not how it is with them," I said, and inhaled deeply. I had tarried long enough. Yasin's point had struck a chord with me. It was odd, facing the fact that the Cielcin were creatures just as we. That they had children. Birthed them. Raised them after their fashion. It was easy to overlook that fact. Easy to pretend the Cielcin were a race of warriors whole forged. Easy to forget Nobuta Otiolo, the Cielcin child I had slain.

It was not easy to forget the Cielcin child I'd seen cut from the bowels of Duke Valavar on Perfugium. His swollen belly, the alien fetus falling from him, sac bursting like an overripe fig, limbs tangled in the poor man's entrails. That had not been a typical birth. That the Cielcin *could* implant their young in other organisms did not mean it was preferable. Indeed, among the Cielcin, it was seen as a mark of shame, for only the very lowest of their race—those who had no slaves beneath them—went to such lengths, lacking any Cielcin host for the embryo produced parthenogenetically within.

In foreign organisms, the Cielcin fetus formed a sac—a kind of soft eggshell—about itself. That sac put out nematodes, thin, ciliated umbilical cords that attached to the host body and so nourished itself, provided the host was protein compatible, as all humans are. There were women who survived giving birth to one of the Pale, provided the embryo was not implanted in the digestive tract—as happened—but every man so afflicted died horribly, torn open from within.

Another bout of screaming tore from the gangway, making Yasin and the other man jump. "Stay here," I said to them.

Brushing past them, I stepped out onto the gantry, corrugated floor creaking. The frigate I had assigned the Cielcin was identical in every way to the one I had ridden down to Danu's surface, save that it was stored in another launch bay, one much farther and more remote from the parts of the ship my people and the Danuan refugees all occupied. I had sold that isolation to Annaz as part of the Cielcin's *punishment*. The featherheads still wanted blood, but it had been better than nothing.

Otomno's howling challenged Cassandra and myself at every step, pushing us back.

We were not welcome, not wanted, not a part of the world that screaming issued from. We were human beings, *yukajjimmn*, xenobites ourselves.

It was not our place, not our concern.

The noise issued from down the hall to our right, forward on that black ship. We followed it, Cassandra keeping pace two or three steps behind.

We came upon them suddenly. They'd holed up in one of the storage lockers, a small, rectangular room running parallel to the corridor, adjacent to the airlock. It was not so unlike the room where we had met William of Danu, and Victor, and the other children, with environment suits hanging in niches along the outer wall, benches and footlockers for the crew in place.

Just who had Sagara intended them for? And why? The question intruded, was forced out just as suddenly by the appearance of Otomno. I averted my eyes at once, threw out my arm to halt Cassandra. It hadn't seen me, and I wished that I had not seen what I had seen. Otomno standing, hands and bony forehead pressed to the bulkhead opposite, naked, legs apart, straining; the dull metal smeared with gore.

Cassandra covered her mouth. I had stopped her too late.

"Was that?"

I nodded. I'd seen it, too. The sac. Black veined and gold, hanging from between its mother's legs.

Abruptly, I recalled Cassandra's birth. That Jaddian natalists had drained the tank of its amniotic fluid, so that she lay curled on the mat, her little hands flailing blindly as they drew her out for suction. Without a mother to

force the fluid from her lungs, she needed immediate intervention—every palatine did. Eighteen months in the tank had left her stronger than any low-born babe. Her skull was already fused, her legs straight, her muscles well developed. But she could not breathe. The physicians moved her to a little creche, where they plied the babe with machines. I saw the *liquor amnii* spatter the inside of the vacuum pump, a pale and perfect gold.

And then she screamed, bellowing her challenge at the world, mad as fire.

And I had wept, and wept as I had not wept in all my decades of exile. For joy, for Valka, and for *her*.

There had been no blood, no screaming. Only the calm, directed speech of the prince's physicians. Aldia had sent his best, the men and women who oversaw the birthing of his own descendants. Their chief—an *eali* woman with eyes like twin drops of amber—had told me that she had birthed young Kaim himself so long ago.

This was different. Desperate. Horrible.

Where was Ramanthanu?

It had left Otomno alone.

Cassandra's hand fell, pressed flat against her belly. I put a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"Where's Ramanthanu?" she asked, voice barely more than a whisper.

I put a finger to my lips.

A shadow fell upon us both, and turning I found Ramanthanu standing in the door, its normally braided hair unbound, its eyes narrowed. "*Detu tuka ti-saem-gi ne?*"

Why are you here?

We'd not been called, were surely not wanted.

"My men heard. They sent for me."

Ramanthanu did not move. No sign was there on its face of what passed within. Finally, it said, "It is the day, my prince."

"I can see that," I said.

"You must not interfere," it said, and stood so as to bar our passage, our line of sight. "Otomno's shame is its own."

“Its shame?” I asked.

“Another soul has been wrenched from paradise this day,” the captain said. “Otomno is the door. It is a shameful thing, to bring a soul to this creation.”

I held the captain’s gaze a moment, surprised by its answer.

“You no longer believe that,” I said.

The captain blinked.

“It is your child, is it not?” I asked, made to look over the creature’s shoulder.

“Yes,” the human word again. “*Raka ba-tatsun.*”

“Should you feel shame?” I asked. “For your part in bringing this creature into the world?”

Behind it, Otomno screamed, bent double.

“I bear no shame,” Ramanthanu said. “I have given it to Otomno.”

“You misunderstand me,” I said. “I don’t believe either one of you should be ashamed at all.”

The captain twitched, said, “It is better to die. Better than to live in this —”

“In this what? This *iugannan*? This *lie* of Utannash?” I asked. “Is Utannash not your god?”

“Abba!” Cassandra shouted.

A soft, wet sound issued from the chamber behind the lop-horned captain, followed by a dull *smack*. Otomno’s cries turned to panting, wheezing, gasping. Ramanthanu watched its mate, and as it did so, I saw Otomno fall to its knees, hands smearing the wall black.

The egg sac lay on the floor, surface crawling as the child’s limbs stretched it from within. Black blood—diluted so it seemed a pale, gray-blue, covered the floor. It was nearly two feet from end to end, and perhaps a quarter as wide. It squirmed, a golden worm.

Ignoring Otomno, Ramanthanu bent and lifted the wriggling thing. Torn cilia leaked ebon blood where they dangled from all over the surface. Drawing back one hand, Ramanthanu extended a single finger, a single

talon. With delicate care—surprising tenderness—the monster tore the sac open, heedless of the filth.

Cassandra made an appalled sound as the amnion split, and the creature within *unfolded*, thin arms and legs exposed to air for the first time. I pressed forward into the room, approached the Cielcin with its infant cradled in its hand.

The xenobite's bairn was not like human get. Not curled or cramped, or stout of limb, but a long, spindle-legged little beast. It must have been three cubits long already, all stretched, and thin—terribly thin. Thin as a serpent. No horns were there upon its head, and the hair that grew behind its half-formed crest was black as any goat's. It turned its cramped, flat face toward me, white hide smeared with golden wax. I stood there, transfixed, horrified, remembering the creature that had fallen, stillborn, from the bowels of poor Duke Valavar. That one had been, if anything, even larger, longer, better developed—and I wondered if Cielcin children grew larger, faster, hardier in foreign hosts.

The little thing opened its eyes. I'd expected to find them black as space, but they were not. They were the milk-blue of the very blind, clouded and veiled.

"Is it . . . blind?" Cassandra asked.

I translated the question.

Ramanthanu exhaled sharply. An affirmative. "We are all born blind," it said, and squinted up at the lights in the ship. "It is darkness that lets us see."

Otomno lay on one side, heaving, panting in a puddle of blood and fluid. Ramanthanu seemed totally disinterested in it, was focused solely on the little creature in its arms. I stood there, half-paralyzed.

The bairn was silent. It did not scream as Cassandra had screamed, did not wail or thrash to find itself wrenched from warm darkness to cold light. But its mouth opened, revealed teeth like glass needles in gums black and wet as oil. Carefully then—so carefully—Ramanthanu completed the task of stripping the amnion from its daughter-son. This it cast on the ground by Otomno.

“Velenamma,” it said, *“eza paqqa.”*

The other Cielcin—its body wracked by birth trauma—turned and looked up into the face of its master, its mate. The Cielcin did not sweat, did not weep, but blood and amniotic fluid—and other fluids beside—caked the creature’s flesh as it looked up at Ramanthanu. It did not speak—only reached out and seized the crumpled amnion with one clawed hand, curling as it did so to present its back to us, worrying the amnion with its teeth.

Cassandra turned away.

I had heard it said that among the lowborn, there were those of our own race who so devoured the placenta. I had never believed it, but then I had never seen a child born after the fashion of the apes—not in all my years. The process was not so different, I knew, and marveled at that fact, that similarity, as once I had marveled at a study of Cielcin hands, their palms and fingerbones.

Like, and yet unlike.

“Shall I kill it?” Ramanthanu’s voice was flat, sans feeling.

It was a moment before I realized it was speaking to me.

“What?” Cassandra interjected. Ramanthanu had asked the question in the standard, so she had understood.

Ramanthanu hesitated before answering. When it did, it spoke to me, as if I had asked the question. “You are *Aeta*,” it said. “Our lives are yours . . .” When still I did not speak, it said, “If it is your will that our kind should be extinguished—if it is the will of Utannash, greatest of gods—then I shall extinguish this.” It extended its arms, offering the bairn for my inspection.

I reached out my hand—the right—and lay it on the child’s brow. The little thing quivered at the touch, turned its face to try and bite me with its needle teeth. I drew my hand away, and laughed. “Some fire in it already!” I said, and restored my hand to its unhorned crown. One fragile, six-fingered hand flailed weakly, seized in Ramanthanu’s hair. It pulled, and the big Cielcin tugged its head away, snarling.

“What is your will?” Ramanthanu’s voice still had that flat, brittle edge to it.

“What is its name?” I asked, ignoring the question, dismissing it

entirely. It was not the will of Utannash that that little thing should be destroyed. I would not believe it. Nor could. Had Ragama himself appeared in that moment and ordered me to action, I would have believed it some test.

Ramanthanu blinked, both sets of lids flickering. One-two. One-two. “*Siajunyu o-namshun*,” it said at last.

There is no name.

“No name?” I asked.

“It must find its name,” Ramanthanu said, sparing a glance for Otomno, who was licking its fingers. I did not like how little the other Pale seemed to figure in the concerns of its mate, but held my silence.

“Find its name?” Cassandra asked.

“It will tell us who it is,” Ramanthanu said. “By what it does.”

I thought I understood. I’d heard it said that in ancient days, men and women abstained from naming their children, for fear that the child would pass before long.

In nature, most children died.

“We name our children when they’re born,” I said.

Ramanthanu’s eyes narrowed—another curiously human gesture. “How? You do not know them.”

I looked at Cassandra. “You know who you hope they’ll be.”

“Hope?” Ramanthanu echoed the human word. “What is this?”

There was no Cielcin word for hope.

“You should name it.”

The captain jerked its head in the negative. “It has done nothing.”

“*Raka daratham*,” I said.

It is alive.

“Darathama.” Otomno turned to look up at us, face smeared black and golden. “It is *Darathama*.”

“Darathama,” I said, and smiled at the little devil.

It meant *living one*. A name at once auspicious and ignominious. A living thing’s least accomplishment, and its greatest one.

Once again I touched its head, brushed its unhorned forehead with my

thumb up and down, back and forth. Once more it tried to bite me.
“Welcome to the world.”

I drew my hand away, by a sign permitting the captain to take the creature to its . . . to its mother. But Otomno did not turn to receive the bairn into its arms, instead turned its back on it as Ramanthanu knelt and set the thing against Otomno’s pallid flesh.

Cassandra cursed as the bairn bit its mother’s flesh, attached itself like a lamprey to a fish. I put my clean hand on her back to steady her, and saw at once where the Cielcin had found the inspiration for their *nahute*.

The Cielcin mother fed its child with its own life’s blood.

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CHAPTER 47

INTO THE LION'S DEN

WE SAW IT REFLECTED first, its light shining brightly off one of the planet's twin orbital mirrors, a flash of fire that shattered the edge of the night. I stepped toward the high windows then, hands behind my back, cape swirling about my ankles. Then the sun—my sun—rose above the curving darkness, and the second mirror after it, so that I beheld her face: celadon and alabaster; ivory and copper; amber, umber, onyx, with here and there the inlaid cobalt of rivers or of seas, each rimmed in pale gold.

Gododdin.

The light of that murdered sun shone bright in the ceaseless day of space, and the fire of it caught on the sails and gilded hulls of the fleet that swarmed about the planet, so that she seemed a queen attended by a host of gleaming angels. So small they seemed, like embers beside a bonfire, though the greatest of them were larger even than *Tamerlane* had been, whole cities in motion.

"Have they seen us?" I asked, trying to count them.

As well try to number the sands of Earth.

"They have not seen us," Orphan answered, voice a low growl.

"We remain concealed."

The very geometries that confounded the vision of the Watchers confused the long-range sensors of our fellow starships. They might have seen *something* had they turned their instruments in our direction. A blur, a smudge perhaps. Gravimetric detectors would be able to detect us—we were sufficiently massive, even at range—but they would be less likely to start there, and at any rate, I did not need much time. I intended to reveal our presence. It was only that I did not want to be seen first.

We had entered the system some weeks earlier, emerging very near the

sun to hide the radiation flash of real-space reversion. That was an old trick—a very old trick—one the God Emperor himself had used against the Mericanii. We had lingered there in solar orbit for the space of several days, waiting for the appropriate vector to approach the planet.

Gododdin's sun was supergiant, a gleaming red titan, unfathomably old. It had endured aeons. The scholiasts say it was formed far nearer the heart of our galaxy, but that some cataclysm had ejected it from the core regions. Along the way, it had collected its planets, dragging them after it across the chiliads. Gododdin. Dismal Cynon. Ywain, with its clouds like fire. Eidyn and Aeron, Elfed, and Dal. These it had gathered to itself, and a million lesser worlds besides. Moonlets and asteroids, comets like crystal in the bright night.

To think that that thousand-thousand year journey—all that time and space—had brought it here. To think that something so vast and ancient, so glorious beyond the reckoning of men, would meet its end at the hand of one little better than an ape, though he commanded the power of devils.

"Prepare to broadcast on all frequencies on my mark." It was Vorgossos again. *Just* like Vorgossos, save that Lorian was gone. No reply to my telegraph had ever come.

"Understood."

"Understood."

Edouard, Cassandra, and Selene stood to one side, Neema alongside. All were watching me. Only Selene smiled, a faint flicker of encouragement. Of belief. I returned that smile only haltingly. The plan was hers.

You must set the tenor, she said. Deny them the chance to build the frame. If Father will not come to you, you must go to him—and to everyone. Let them all know the truth from your own lips. She shared my fears about her brother, about the Chantry and the looming succession—she had fears all her own, felt these things more sharply, more personally than I ever could.

It was *her* family, after all.

We had to maneuver ourselves into broadcast range, as close to real time as sense and physics would allow, the better to transmit all at once. The

Chantry might lock down a sizeable portion of the fleet. But they would not lock down everyone. And Alexander would hear. And the Emperor—or the Emperor’s people.

I turned my back upon Gododdin, and on the sun I would destroy. Facing the empty space before the well, I bent my head, tucked my thumbs into my belt. For a moment, it was as though I had never died upon the floor of the Arx Caelestis, as though Ragama and his lord had not lifted the weight of pain and years from me. I felt as Atlas then, back bent beneath some almighty weight.

At length I raised my eyes to Orphan’s, black and almost white. The creature put its heads together, its countless golden chains tinkling as it moved, three hands gripping the arms of the high seat.

I gave the signal, and at once Kharn’s silverfish descended, circling me as though I were a sun myself, camera eyes flaring.

“Broadcasting.”

One more breath.

Let it end.

“My Lords of the Sollan Empire,” I began. “Men of Jadd, of the Republic. Freeholders, Mandarmen, Nihonjin. Strangers and friends, allies all. I am Hadrian Marlowe. I have returned from the fighting at Danu, to bring you word of our failure.” Here I paused, sparing a glance for the princess, for my daughter, for Neema, and Edouard. “We set out to destroy the Cielcin capital. We failed. The Scourge of Earth knew of our coming, and fled. We attempted to liberate the planet, but the Cielcin set a . . .” How should I describe it? Describe *her*? “. . . a weapon against us, the likes of which we have not seen. Our fleet was decimated, our Tavrosi allies all but destroyed.”

I hesitated.

I had to tell them what I had done, had to tell them the Cielcin were coming.

But when I shouted the name of Gododdin to Cassandra across the Danuan snows, I had committed an act of treason. In doing so, I’d

compromised Imperial security, handed the location of our fleet—the *Emperor's* location—to the enemy. And not just to the enemy.

To Dorayaica itself—and to the Watchers.

Orphan was watching me, eyes like stars. Cassandra and Selene both were gray faced, grave as stones. Edouard clutched his crucifix through his shirt. His eyes were closed. Neema looked ready to be sick. I felt . . . I felt as I had felt on Berenike, at Deira, when I had stood beneath the eye of the Cielcin thunderbolt, in the Prophet's shadow.

That was the time. The moment. While the whole system could hear. Before Alexander or the Chantry or anyone could obscure the truth. The truth . . .

"The Cielcin are coming. They know the location of this base. I gave it to them. It is my belief that the Cielcin intend to launch a full-scale assault upon Earth itself, that Dorayaica intends the destruction of the mother world to demoralize us. I have offered a better target, one the Prophet cannot resist. It will bring the full weight of the Cielcin horde down upon *this* system. *This* is our chance, our *one* chance. It is *here* that we will make our stand. Here, *here!* At Gododdin! We could ask for no better place! They think themselves the hammer. They think that they will break us all at once, but they will break *on* us. Here. At Gododdin. Once and for all."

"We are receiving a message!" Orphan's clear voice rang out.

Its twin joined in, saying, "It is the planet."

I knew that even then the inquisitors on every battle cruiser and dreadnought, every frigate and fast destroyer of the fleet were working to block my transmission. So clearly I could picture their scrambling, scuttling about like so many beetles disturbed by the overturning of a rock.

Let them run.

"By now, you will have heard how I slew the traitor, Ohannes Douro, who used a daimon machine against me. How I broke his ship with a single shot!" I was careful then, so careful, not to paint a target on the Chantry.

"I have at my command weapons forged on Earth herself, weapons made by the Americans of old." I allowed myself the barest pause.

Mericanii? Mericanii.

“With these weapons, we destroyed *nine* of the enemy’s worldships at Danu—the most mankind had ever claimed in a single battle, and that was a *defeat*! Had we not been forced to flee, we would have been victorious. But with the full support of the fleet here, we will be.”

“Message repeats,” came Orphan’s castrati.

I fixed the nearest of Kharn’s silverfish with the full force of my eye, imagined that I might pierce the veil of radio and of laser light, that I could see straight into the heart and mind of every chanter, cathar, cantor, and inquisitor that listened. It was to them I spoke, to every one of the late Douro’s shadowy friends, the secret masters of Empire.

“There are those of you who think yourselves my enemy, but there is only one enemy, and they are coming.” I stood then square, thumbs in my belt, shoulders back, “That is why I have returned—when I might have fled—to join my strength to yours, to put these weapons at the service of my friend, the Emperor—if he is yet among you. Together, we will end this war.”

I gave Orphan the signal, and the light in the silverfish went out.

A moment of silence passed. A second. No more.

“That’s done it,” I said. The Chantry might back down, recalling what I knew, and more—recognizing what I had not said. I had not exposed the Emperor’s illness, but had hinted that I knew of it. I had not attacked the Chantry, though they knew I could. I had laid the carcass of the daimon called Ship before the lords of the Empire on Forum, but what had passed that day at the Porta Leonora would not have traveled far. But I might have used my broadcast then to lay bare all I knew, and had not.

“We are being scanned,” Orphan said.

“Message repeats!” came the creature’s other voice, high and clear.

I looked to Selene, felt the shadow pass over me as it settled on her face. “Put it through.”

The silverfish changed their orbits, sketched a window in the air before me. A flat image, not a full holograph. It showed a chamber clad in the glossy-black legionary style, brass accents and white. I recognized the command center in Fort Din at once, with its map tables and the hanging

stalactites of holography projection suites. A man stood at one such table, flanked by the white and crimson of the Martian Guard. I knew him at once, in his white armor and open-faced helm, his breastplate sculpted with the two worthies Arthur and Alexander.

“—se your broadcast at once. A Legion escort group is en route to your location. Heave to, and prepare to be boarded. Repeat: Heave to, and prepare to be boarded. You are to relinquish control of your vessel at once, else your presence in this system will be considered hostile and treated accordingly. Failure to respond or comply will result in our use of military force. Do you read?”

“*Dégage!*” Edouard cursed. “He must know he can’t outgun us.”

“He knows he won’t have to,” I said. I had just announced my intent to cooperate with Imperial powers. “He can’t see us?”

I’d directed this last to Orphan, who shook both its heads, false shirt of golden chains shimmering as it moved. “He does not know we are watching.”

I let him talk a moment longer. How like his father he looked. A true monarch, his armor almost mirror white. Hair almost so red as his tunic. I think it was then that I first saw it: that glimmer of what his father had seen in him. The Emperor who might be coiled tight within the man before me. There was a shrewdness in those emerald eyes I had not marked there before; a placid, pharaonic chill. His was the face not of a chessman, but of a master, a player of games.

“Lex . . .” Selene’s voice was hushed.

I raised a hand for quiet, advanced upon the image.

He knew his position, knew mine. Seeing the depth of calculation in the man then, I wondered if I had misjudged him all my life. Here was a viper, an adder, a serpent fully grown into its teeth.

How had I not seen it? Not understood?

I clenched my jaw.

“Starship *Demiurge*,” Alexander said, repeating his message, “this is Imperial High Command, Fort Din, Gododdin. You are in violation of our airspace. By order of His Imperial Highness, the Prince Regent, on behalf

of His Imperial Radiance, William XXIII, you are hereby ordered to cease your broadcast at once. A Legion escort group is en route to your location. Heave to, and prepare to be boarded. Repeat: Heave to, and prepare to be boarded. You are to relinquish control of your vessel at once, else your presence in this system will be considered hostile and treated accordingly. Failure to respond or comply will result in our use of military force. Do you read?"

I let him speak, watching his face, his posture. He gripped the gilded handle of his sword in its red leather holster with one hand. The other rested casually—in a pose all too familiar—at his belt, microns from the thumb catch that triggered his body shield. The message was not looped, as Orphan's words had indicated. He was reciting it himself, reading from a prompter I could not see. In between recitations, he shifted, eyes moving to some other readout. I studied him a moment longer, marking the Martian group at his back, and the vision of the broader room I'd been accorded.

As I studied his face, the image seemed to drain almost of color, or all color but the Imperial white and red. So bright the blackness of *Demiurge* about me seemed almost blue, mighty opposites, two worlds intersecting. Time stopped in the space between recitations of his little speech, until only my blood seemed to move.

He thinks I will retaliate, I realized. He is showing me the people to dissuade an attack.

Not taking my face from the display, I asked, "What's our time?"

Orphan's reply was automatic, not requiring clarification. "Fourteen minutes, thirty-four seconds."

It was longer than I wanted. I would have to delay more.

"Where is this escort group?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at the projection above the holography well.

"Closing fast," Edouard said. He had come to stand beside the well, and pointed at a cluster of little arrowheads converging on our location from Gododdin orbit.

Orphan interjected. "The ships," it said.

"The ships will arrive in just under twenty-two minutes."

“You’re sure this is a good idea?” Cassandra asked.

I looked at her sadly. She gripped the handle of her own sword as if it were a prop. Her eyes were wide, red-lit by the Imperial holograph. “If it’s not,” I said, “it’s too late.”

I had crossed the Rubicon already, hurled my lance into enemy territory in declaration of war, plunged headfirst into the lion’s den.

Alea iacta est.

“Let me talk to him,” Selene said, coming forward.

I put a hand out to forestall her. “Let me,” I said.

“But—”

“There may be time for that,” I said, “but let me start.”

“Starship *Demiurge*?” Alexander’s voice slashed the air between us. “Hadrian! I know you can hear me! Stand your ship down and prepare to be boarded.”

He was getting irritated. I could hear it—a high, bitter note in his voice. By Orphan’s count, he had given his little speech now three times to no reply.

I waited for him to start again.

When he was as far as *the Prince Regent*, I gave the signal, and Orphan opened a channel.

“The Prince Regent!” I said, speaking loudly and airily, standing straight. “You are to be congratulated on your promotion. Where is your Lord Father?”

Nigh two light-seconds separated *Demiurge* from the planet. I counted them, drumming my fingers on my belt as old Raine Smythe used to do.

One, two, three, four.

I saw my words strike the prince’s ear, for he shifted back a step, looking round. I had timed the interruption to land before he had finished his little speech, and he faltered.

Shah esna, I thought. *Check.*

“My father is in fugue,” Alexander said.

Fugue again, I thought, looking past Alexander at Selene. *Or fugue still?*

Was the Emperor dead? It was possible—more than possible.

The Prince Regent . . .

“So he is,” I said. “Nevertheless, it is your father I have come to see.”

“Even were he conscious,” Alexander said, “my father would have no truck with traitors. If what you say is true—”

“Then I have done him and mankind a greater service than any other of his so-called allies,” I said. “I have set the stage for the final battle.”

“You have brought the enemy down upon us!” the prince said.

“You would rather they fell someplace else?” I asked. “On Forum, perhaps? On Avalon? Anywhere but here?”

Somewhat to my surprise, the prince did not take the bait. “You have compromised the security of this base. The security of this fleet. My *father’s* security—if what you say is true.”

As he spoke, a figure moved in among the Martians at his back, hardly to be seen behind their plumed helms and bristling lances. But I marked him, his sable robes and white Egyptian collar. His head was bare, pale almost as the collar itself, but for the charcoal round his eyes and the runemark on his brow, like the English F reversed.

The Phoenician *Yod*.

Another Cantor.

His presence at the prince’s side—the Choir’s increased presence in the halls of power—heightened that sense I’d had when first I crossed paths with Samek in the Porta Prince Arthur: that they were desperate, scrambling. That Leviathan surfaced only as it died.

I could not then see it for what it truly was. Not a sign of desperation, but one of triumph.

That Leviathan had risen to bask in the light of the sun.

What was it Gibson had said, that day we found Horizon’s husk in the bowels of the Royal Archives? That the ancient Christians were right to name pride man’s greatest sin? If I had known then what I know now . . . and I knew so much already . . . I would have struck *Aurora* from the sky, and William’s shade would have thanked me for it.

“Is there some other place you would rather fight them?” I asked, taking

my eyes from Yod's face. "The fleet is here. Our strength is here. We are better equipped here, better defended."

"There are four billion people in this system!" Alexander said. "You have placed every one of them in the enemy's path!"

"Every man, woman, and child is in the enemy's path, Alexander!" I said, thrust a finger at the deck beneath my feet. "Every one! This is a war of *extinction*, have you forgotten? The Cielcin have not."

The prince hissed, composure cracking. The hand not strangling his sword went to his hip, red cape swirling, his agitation plain. He exchanged looks with the Martian legate helmeted at his side, glanced briefly in the direction of Yod.

Alexander fixed me with the full force of his gaze, and I saw his father's phantom in him. "My men will be upon you in just under twenty minutes," he said. "If you truly seek to join your strength to ours, as you say, you will not hinder them."

I looked to Orphan, to Edouard, Cassandra, and Selene. "They will not be permitted to board."

One, two, three, four.

"Failure to comply will result in your being branded an enemy of the realm."

"I thought I was already a traitor."

One, two, three, four.

"You admit it?"

"Your men will not be permitted to board," I said flatly, and glanced toward Orphan. The light of what I'd done would not reach them yet for some minutes. I had to keep them talking.

"You defy me?" Alexander said.

"I am not your servant," I said. "Yours, or any man's."

"If you do not comply, my men *will* attack."

"And I will respond in kind."

"You dare call yourself our *ally*?"

"I am," I said, "but I am neither your vassal nor your slave. The one I serve sits above even your father."

“You dare!” the prince exclaimed; eyes wide as moons. “My father is Empire, the Son of Earth himself. There is none higher!”

The very Martians—until that moment a mass of living statuary—bristled at my words, though their lances were three hundred thousand miles away. Just then another voice, calm and cold as a lake in winter, injected itself into the air about us. “If your power is so great, Lord Marlowe, tell us: At Danu, why did you fail?”

It was the cantor’s voice.

“I see you have one of the Choir among you,” I said. “Tell me, Alexander, how much must a dog strain at the leash before it becomes itself the master?”

“Your every word is blasphemy!” Yod sneered.

“Blasphemy?” I asked, and stepped forward so that almost I passed inside the field of the holograph’s projection. The silverfish eddied about me. “Tell me, demon-priest, what meaning that word can *possibly* hold for one such as yourself? I know what you are, sorcerer. What you believe. Your Earth is a fiction, a false god, a fetish you dangle for the amusement of your pets and your slaves. You think I have forgotten Vorgossos? Forgotten your sister, Samek? She *murdered* me, but here I stand! Living proof of the power I serve. Can you say the same? If I strike you down, will the computers you call gods grant you life eternal?”

Yod’s eyes were hard as glass, bright as plasma fire in their darkly made-up lids. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“And you have said enough!” I said. “I have not tasted your poison and been remade to suffer it a second time. Be silent!”

Aware, perhaps, that allowing Yod to run away with the conversation made him appear weaker and weaker with each passing second, Alexander spoke up. “You have not answered his question. These Mericanii weapons of yours were supposed to assure your victory, but you failed.”

“I told you,” I said. “Dorayaica was not there. By the time we arrived, the Prophet had already fled.”

“And yet you did not destroy the fleet left behind?” Yod asked.

I ignored him, pretended not to hear.

“Answer him!”

“As you answer to him?” I asked.

One, two, three, four.

Selene’s face was white as milk, her hands clasped against her breast.

“You *dare*,” Alexander said once more, voice dangerously low. “It is not enough that you betray us to the enemy, not enough that you kidnap my sister and dishonor her, not enough that you threaten *my* people and blaspheme the true religion. Now you sow dissension, insinuate that it is not the Emperor who rules!”

“I thought it was the Prince Regent?” I asked.

Alexander stamped one foot, advancing like a fencer. “I am my father’s hand! His voice!”

“Then produce him!” I said.

“Produce my sister!” Alexander said. “Or have you chained her to your bed?”

“That’s enough!” Selene surged forward, entering the orbit of our drones. “That’s enough, Lex! Lord Marlowe did not kidnap me. I went myself! And I don’t like your accusations. Lord Marlowe has not *dishonored me*, no more than you dishonor yourself with this dumb show!” Her hands were at her sides, balled up into glittering fists. “Stand your men down!”

“Selene . . . ?” Alexander’s furious composure broke a moment. His mouth hung open. Had he truly thought her my prisoner? “Why . . . ?”

“Where is Father, Lex?” Selene asked.

One, two, three, four.

Silence.

“Where is he?” Selene’s voice almost choked.

“He is on *Aurora*,” the prince said, drawing back. His eyes were on the floor.

“Is he alive?” I asked.

A spasm of something like pain went across the prince’s face. His answer, when it came, was from far away, his voice a memory of wind. “Yes.”

Do you think I could kill him? he asked with those eyes. The pain in his face was plain. Whatever else was true, Alexander loved his father. He always had, though the Emperor had ever been remote from his children. But decades of campaigning together had changed that, so that Alexander was as near to his lord father as anyone in creation—save perhaps for Lord Nicephorus.

“We destroyed nine of their worldships,” I said, at last answering Yod’s question.

“What?” Alexander looked at me.

“There were more than *twenty* in Danu system when we arrived, but Dharan-Tun was not among them. I led a team to the surface to rescue those of the natives I could. We escaped with some three thousand of them, while *Demiurge* and our fleet engaged theirs in orbit. We destroyed *nine* of their worldships, but lost nearly all the Tavrosi in the process. The Cielcin sent one of their gods on us, and we were forced to flee or risk losing *Demiurge*. There was no other way.”

“So you say,” Yod said.

Again I pretended not to hear him. Not so Selene. “Lord Marlowe is telling the truth, Cantor. The thing that attacked us . . . if it weren’t for the Mericanii weapons, we would be lost.”

Yod’s pale eyes studied Selene’s face from behind the Martian soldiers. “That may be Princess, but if that is so, then the weapons you carry are worthless.”

You don’t believe that, I thought. I looked to Orphan, raised my eyebrows.

The centimanus extended one of its hands, three fingers upraised.

Three minutes.

Alexander’s Martians were eight minutes behind. They would come too late.

“Order your men to stand down,” I said. “I will not permit them on board this ship.”

“If you fire on my men,” Alexander said, “I will have no choice but to

respond in kind. If you could not best the fraction of the Cielcin fleet you faced at Danu alone, what hope have you against us?"

He was not wrong. In a pure naval battle, ship to ship, we could not hope to prevail, not against the near totality of the Imperial armada, supported as it was by the fleets of the great princes: Bourbon and Hohenzollern, Yamato and Mahidol and the rest, and by the lords of Jadd, and the Durantines . . .

. . . and Alexander knew I would not let it come to that.

But he believed that I would avoid it to the point of surrender, believed that he could pressure me into standing down.

Orphan curled one finger.

"Lex, stop this," Selene said. "Let me speak to Father. There's no need for this!"

"No need?" Alexander echoed her. "Selene, your . . . Marlowe sold our location to the enemy!"

"He did what he did to save the Eternal City!" she said. "Is it not better to fight here than there?"

The prince checked the terminal embedded in one white gauntlet. "My ships will be in position in ten minutes."

"I am not your enemy, Alexander," I said. "If I were, you would already be dead."

"Stand down and permit my men to inspect your ship." Alexander had not taken his hand off his sword. "If you do not comply, they have orders to open fire."

"You would fire on your own sister?" I asked, turning to take in Selene.

Pain flickered once more in the hollows of my former squire's face, but it was the prince who put a knife in the hands of one Urslic tribesman who answered me. "I have other sisters." He turned his head. "End transmission."

Unseen by the callow prince, Orphan curled another finger. Only one remained.

In the fresh darkness and silence of the bridge, the giant said, "We have less than a minute."

I found that I was shaking.

Gododdin was the second of seven planets. Only Elfed was nearer the mighty sun—a black cinder of a gas giant. Beyond Gododdin was Cynon, an airless rock. Then came Dal, the second giant, blue-green and so massive it was very nearly a star. After Dal came Ywain, with its many moons—some of them peopled. Then Aeron, and Eidyn last of all.

Even as we spoke, telegraphs had doubtless begun, sent by outriders on the borders of the system. Someone somewhere had surely seen it . . . the thing that I had done. Messages were surely flying, passing from one entangled electron to the next faster than thought. The outermost ships of the fleet had surely seen it—those closer to distant Eidyn than we. I pictured officers running, heard the too-familiar howling of alarms, curses in Galstani, in Jaddian, in every tongue of men.

“The planet! The planet! The planet!”

Eidyn was gone.

Orphan’s finger furled. I shut my eyes, still registered the light and flash of fire—in perfect silence—that filled the black beyond Gododdin’s orbit, five billion miles away.

A single shot was all it had taken. A bolt of pure neutronium accelerated to within a whisper of light’s slow speed. The shot struck the planet five degrees above the equator, passed clean through its molten core and out the other side, leaving an exit wound the size of many an empire of the Golden Age of Man. The force of that impact shattered the world, matter turned to energy from sheer kinesis, and for a moment, Eidyn lived as a newborn sun.

The shot left Gododdin’s system. Thence it passed beyond all knowledge, save mine and Orphan’s only. We had aimed it at the heart of our galaxy, at that place where darkness swallows all light. There, and only there, in the black corpse of ten thousand suns, could such a thing meet its end with some measure of safety.

“We are receiving a transmission,” Orphan said.

Selene’s face was white as milk. There were tears on her lovely face.

I have other sisters.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and gestured for Cassandra to take her by the arm.

Whirling to face the window and the fading shine of the planet I had just destroyed, I said, "Orphan, put them through."

"There is no image!" the centimanus said.

"There is only voice."

"What have you done?" The prince's voice was tense, terrified.

I turned to face the holography well, with its maps of Gododdin system done in rings of white light. I did not answer him at once. The light of the planet's destruction was already fading, the shadows it carved against Orphan's throne and the orgiastic sculpture behind it slowly softening as Eidyn went from stillborn star to embers.

"I thought a demonstration in order," I said.

I had selected Eidyn carefully. The planet was farthest from its star and uninhabited, a barren earth long since stripped of its valuable minerals. Its destruction would send a gravitational shockwave through the system, but so small was it—relatively speaking—and so distant, that the disturbance could not be very great. What shrapnel remained—pieces of rock large as kingdoms—would spread out across a million miles of space, merely the latest addition to the system's Oort cloud.

"A demonstration?" Alexander's voice was cold. "What did you do? How did—"

"That is but the smallest part of the destructive power of this vessel."

"You threaten us?" Alexander said.

"The Cielcin threaten us," I said.

"A planet!" I could almost see the prince's face, the way he gripped the rim of the projection table. "An entire planet!"

"The Cielcin will do worse when they arrive," I said. "You need my help. You need this ship."

"Because you brought them here!"

"Master!" Orphan raised its twin voices.

"Master! Master!"

I looked its way. The creature had raised both its left hands, port-wine stains on its pale flesh plain to see.

"There is another!" it said.

“We are receiving a transmission. Broad spectrum, all frequencies.”

Edouard spoke then. “They’re broadcasting to every ship in the system?”

“Put it through.”

A whine sounded across the bridge then, echoing off the black vaults and intricately graven pillars of the bridge, the squeal of some electronic feedback, followed by a crackling sound. I stood stock-still. Surely the Pale could not have arrived, not yet.

Then a voice that was no voice at all spoke. “Enough,” it said, flat, toneless, void of all human feeling. “That is all . . . more than enough.”

Despite its brittle, inhuman quality, I knew it. That timbre. That tone.

Selene knew it first, knew it better. “Father . . . ?”

But the Emperor did not hear her—his transmission was one-way only. I felt the princess’s hand seize upon my wrist, her nails like talons. I felt a chill pass over me at the sound of that voice, *his* voice, though relief seeped through my every sinew and cord.

He was alive.

“Stand down,” the Emperor said, “all of you. Lord Marlowe. My . . . son. All ships. Stand down.”

If Alexander sent some reply to his father, we on *Demiurge* could not hear it.

“There’s something wrong.” Selene’s hand was iron. Adamant. “He’s getting worse.”

Cassandra interjected, “I thought the prince said he was in fugue.”

“They can’t have awoken him so quickly,” Edouard said.

Or was there something else afoot? The voice sounded . . . sounded like some mummer’s mockery, an impression performed by some machine. It did not sound like the Emperor at all, but if it was not the Emperor, why had his imitators done so poor a job? As a boy, I had watched my mother confect her holograph operas, craft human likenesses from light like clay. Those false men had seemed so lifelike to me, sounded lifelike to me. Such images were forever being crafted, made to blackmail one lord or another,

or to forge evidence in some case or for some casus belli. Many a war of *poine* was started over such deceptions.

Why then was this one so dreadful?

“This is your Emperor, speaking to every ship in the fleet. Imperial override. Code . . . Code . . . Epsilon-three-eight-nine-alpha-actual, two-lambda-twelve-dalet-five. All ships will stand down immediately and assume stable orbits. Repeat: Code Epsilon-three-eight-nine-alpha-actual, two-lambda-twelve-dalet-five. All ships stand down.”

I shut my eyes, let loose a shuddering breath. It had worked.

“Marlowe!” The Emperor’s voice rose. “You will come to me at once, and you will bring my daughter to me!”

Selene’s talons released me, and she drew back a step, eyes wide.

“I have dispatched my private shuttle,” the Emperor said. “You will permit it to . . . to board your ship. I will brook no interference!” These last words were directed not at me, but at Alexander, at Yod, at the Strategoi and the Martian legates. “Your Emperor has spoken!”

Orphan said, “We are detecting a shuttle leaving the Imperial flagship.”

I was already heading for the doors. “Direct them to the nearest docking bay! Selene, with me!”

Cassandra advanced to join us as the princess hurried to catch up, but I raised a hand. “Not this time.”

“You can’t go alone!” she said.

I could only shake my head. “Hold the ship for me. They may try something while I’m gone.”

That sobered her, and she drew back, her one hand going to the hilt of her sword. “I understand.”

She nodded.

It was as near a salute as she ever gave me.

CHAPTER 48

WHITE KNIGHT, RED KING

THE EMPEROR'S SHUTTLE—A black-bodied, wing-shaped vessel covered in gold filigree, wider than it was long—was already waiting for us in the hold when we arrived. Sir Verus went ahead of us, was greeted by a quartet of its fellow Excubitors, towering chrome figures with cloaks of Imperial white and gold. Seeing them, Selene hesitated, drew back a step, half behind me. But they stepped aside, and bowed as Selene and I passed, and followed us up the ramp.

We did not speak much during the short flight that carried us down from *Demiurge*'s high polar orbit to where *Aurora* dwelt. The Excubitors ushered us through the entryway into the main cabin, where a panoramic slice of window looked out over the bowsprit, and red leather couches stood bolted to the floor beneath the watchful eyes of gilded statues depicting the Worthies.

"He's alive," Selene said, standing by the window, watching the fleet draw near. "He's still alive . . ."

I didn't say anything, just stood beside her.

She turned her face from me, so that I stood beside a curtain of carmine hair.

Aurora grew ever nearer, black and gold, beautiful and terrible to behold. The jewel of the Imperial fleet it was. Like unto *Tamerlane* it was, but greater, like a claymore alongside a rapier. Longer it was, and broader, with the same sword-shaped profile, the tapered front, the broad and curving rear section, the castle spires towering above the center line like a piece of the Eternal City itself. It was the flagship of the Imperial fleet, the most formidable ship of her line. About her were ships almost as great: *Huntsman* and *Babylon*, *Samarkand*, *Titania*, and the Chantry flagship

Ararat. And there were lesser ships besides, frigates and destroyers, interceptors, shuttles, lightercraft. All the sky above Gododdin seethed and swarmed with vessels holding loose formation, or else weaving between orbits as they soared from place to place.

As we drew nearer, the city on *Aurora*'s surface—a black-and-golden megalopolis of towers and high halls, with here and there the domed turrets of gun emplacements, the fluted structures of missile tubes—gleamed like Olympos. *Aurora* was more than a city, more than a battleship, it was the Imperial court in exile. When William had departed Forum, he had carried with him thousands of court functionaries, logothete ministers, scholiast advisors, clerks and secretaries, civil servants and slaves. When he had committed to remaining on the frontier after the disaster at Perfugium, when he committed the bulk of his Martians to the front, much of the apparatus of state had left Forum to join him in exile. William had made a second empire in the borderlands, and there waged his war against the enemy.

Our unseen pilot brought us in over the dorsal hull and toward the castle ziggurat that rose near the rear of the mighty ship above the stern cluster, at right angles to her axis of thrust. There was a place prepared for us, a docking armature that led directly into the tower itself. Looking out the window, I marked the presence of a trio of Martian lightercraft—barbed arrowheads just large enough to hold a single man in oxygenated fluid. They broke away as we made our final approach, passing beneath one flying buttress. Selene jumped as clamps anchored the Emperor's yacht in place, and I felt the whine of the ship's engines cooling.

Gododdin hung in the sky above us, white and green, its reflected light shining down upon us. The Excubitors—never speaking, responding to some instruction only they had heard, took up formation near the door. Sir Verus approached the princess and—with one surprisingly gentle hand—touched Selene's shoulder, with the other indicating that we should proceed out the way we had come.

The Knights Excubitor each bowed as the princess drew level with them, and I was then sharply reminded of who and what she was. Selene

responded to their deference, became *the Princess Selene* once again. Her pace slowed, posture straightened, so that with each step she retreated from mere humanity toward something like the demigodhood of her house.

I fell into step beside her, hands at my side, cloak wrapped about my shoulders, so that I seemed almost a smooth-sided chessman. The exit ramp had extended down into a kind of docking umbilical, an arched and slit-windowed hallway that looked out upon the metropolitan cityscape of *Aurora's* crenelated surface. All the gilt plating about us glowed with dull fire.

A man stood waiting for us at the end of the hall, at the head of a mixed retinue of Imperial House androgyns and Martian soldiers in white and scarlet. The Excubitors were all behind us, marching with slow, careful steps, their knees not bending, silver swords—unkindled—at their breasts. At the sight of our reception, Selene's pace quickened.

"Nicephorus!"

The man who was not a man at the head of our receiving party smiled. It looked older than I remembered. Faint lines there were at the corners of its mouth and eyes that I did not recall, and the homunculi's skin had taken on a quality like old parchments, turned translucent with age, so that its veins stood out bluely on the backs of its thin, fine-fingered hands. But it smiled, and there was a warmth in that smile that I had never seen from the creature before. "My princess!" it said, offering a courtly bow. "Welcome home!"

"How is Father?" she asked, not wasting time.

Nicephorus's smile faltered, face betraying its tiredness and its pain. "He . . . endures, child." The androgyn's eyes turned on me. "You did well not to broadcast your knowledge to the whole system, Marlowe. On behalf of my Imperial master, I thank you."

I did not speak. I had just destroyed a planet—a distant, uninhabited planet; but a planet all the same. Doubtless many, *most* of the Emperor's advisors were howling for my blood.

The Emperor's Lord Chamberlain drew itself up, clasped its hands before itself in such a way that its long-nailed first fingers bit into the inside of either of its forearms. The androgyn wore a suit of Imperial scarlet and

gold, a white sash fashioned crosswise from its left shoulder like a baldric hung past the hem of its tunic to its knees. It wore a domed skullcap, white as its sash, with a golden tassel hanging from the crown.

“What you did to the seventh planet . . .” Nicephorus’s jade eyes narrowed. “Will not be forgotten.”

“Did anyone die?”

The Lord Chamberlain had its answer ready. “There were three dozen men stationed at a listening outpost in orbit around the planet.”

I shut my eyes, let the words wash over me. *Three dozen men.*

Three dozen lives. The man I had been would not have felt the blow. But *I* felt their loss in my soul, and shut my eyes. “Then it should not be forgotten,” I said. “I will answer for their deaths in the proper time, but I needed a demonstration, else far more would have died.”

Nicephorus’s eyes narrowed to the merest slits. “It was unnecessary,” Nicephorus said. “My Imperial master would not have permitted the situation to escalate.”

“With respect to William,” I said, “we were not certain he was alive.”

“Hadrian is telling the truth, Uncle Nick,” Selene said. “It’s why I fled. No one had seen Father, not in months, and no one would speak to me.”

The Lord Chamberlain’s face concealed whatever passed behind it as sure as any Jaddian mask. “These are evil days,” it said at last, looking me over. “You’ve a genius for making enemies, that can’t be denied. This action will not endear you to them.”

“If you are referring to the Chantry . . .”

“Of *course* I am referring to the Chantry,” Nicephorus said, stepping forward to stand within a mere cubit of me. “What you did. At Forum. I knew you were mad, but if I had known *how* mad when I first met you at Nessus, I’d have hired one of the Aminoneans myself!” I recognized the name. Friedrich Oberlin had mentioned it once, when he recounted all the ways the Empire had contemplated killing me over the long years of my Jaddian exile—and the ways they had tried.

“Did you know?” I asked.

Nicephorus’s lip curled.

Of course it had known. And William had known—must have known. “You should follow me,” it said finally. “My master is waiting.” It turned, and came to face Selene. Surprising me, then, it pressed a hand to the princess’s cheek, and smiling drew her to itself. “I am glad you are all right, little Princess,” it said. “Your father and I both were very worried.”

“I was perfectly safe, Uncle,” she said, returning the eunuch’s embrace. “Lord Marlowe took very good care of me.”

The homunculus glowered at me as it separated from Selene—one hand still on her shoulder. “If you had allowed *any* harm to befall her—”

Selene interjected. “You mustn’t be angry with him on my account! He did not kidnap me. I did it all myself.”

“He ought to have returned you immediately,” Nicephorus said to Selene, its hairless brows contracting.

“You said it yourself,” she said, “these are evil days. I feared what might happen to *me* if Father were—that is, if he were to—”

The Chamberlain’s expression softened. “He is not dead, Child,” Nicephorus said. “I pray he will have some time yet.”

“How is his health?” I asked.

A shadow passed over Nicephorus’s sexless face. “I think it is best if you come with me.”

• • •

The Imperial apartments were a world apart from the rest of *Aurora*, complete with their own life support, their own power supply, their own hydroponics section, and—though I knew it not—their own engines and flight crew. It was, in truth, a separate ship. It could break away at need, that His Radiance and his innermost court might escape should it be necessary.

Nicephorus led us along the halls dressed not in the mirrored black of Legion vessels, but in porphyry and polychrome. The gilt accents at doorways and panel controls here were not brass, but yellow gold. Marble

statues—white as ghosts—shone in niches along the curving corridor, and red carpets drank the noise of our passage, so that the place seemed more a chapel than a starship. It was all as richly appointed as the Emperor's rooms aboard *Radiant Dawn* had been, but greater. Far greater. A piece of Forum itself hurled upon the outer provinces as a spark is cast from a forge.

The Excubitors went before us, marching swiftly. They led us into a vestibule beneath a dome whose frescoed surface showed Mother Earth's nude figure perched upon the crescent moon while the other planets—represented by anthropomorphized figures—knelt about her majesty. Her cloak was the blue of seas mottled by the green of continents, and her hair was beaten gold. Selene lost a step, looking up, and I caught her.

"Thank you, sir," she said, all *princess* in that moment, and hardly *Selene*.

Nicephorus had turned back to look at us. The Excubitors and the Martians all about us waiting. Only Verus advanced to help Selene stand, in so doing taking her from my arms. I drew back, showing my hands from old reflex, lest the soldiers think me guilty of some indecency.

"I only tripped, Uncle," she said.

Nicephorus was standing on the stairs above us, hands still clasped before itself. It turned, gold tassel swinging, and resumed its stately course.

The doors at the top of the grand stair were guarded by a full decade of the Knights Excubitor, their faces mirrored masks, their swords forever drawn. At a sign from Nicephorus, our own escort broke formation, Martians and Excubitors alike drawing to either side. The Lord Chamberlain turned to face me. It held a hand up to me, thumb and first finger pinched together. "Well you seem to grasp the sensitivity of this matter, Marlowe, but understand: You must not breathe a word of what you are about to see to anyone. William . . ." The Chamberlain's voice broke, and to my astonishment, the creature turned its head away. I had never seen such a display of emotion from the homunculus before, not in all my years. "His safety—the security of the Empire—depends now on secrecy. Already there are whispers. If word of his condition were to become widely known . . ."

“I understand,” I said. A monarch’s position depended in no small part upon the image he showed the world. His face. That nobile profile etched on every coin in his dominion, that portrait hung in every hall. The Emperor was timeless, the North Star of the Constellations of the Blood Palatine. Unmoving. Unchanging. The merest indication that he had wobbled in his place would be enough to set all other stars to wandering. It said something of Alexander that he knew and had done nothing, despite Yod in his ear, despite the other unseen appendages of Leviathan moving in the night, like Brethren’s arms.

Nicephorus once more compressed its face into a funeral mask. It looked as though it had swallowed poison, some bitter pill. It reached out and palmed the lock that controlled the doors of the Imperial residence. They opened without sound, folding into niches in the inner wall, and as they did so I beheld the fact that—though they were clad in ebony and gold leaf, they were of titanium half a cubit thick, and barred with heavy bars.

The Gilded Cage.

Only as I crossed the threshold did I truly notice it, for I felt my awareness dim. My vague sense of infinity shrank, became only the smaller infinity of what lay within. The ceaseless sensation of eyes was gone, and I guessed that the residence was Faraday shielded. A number of Aventine House androgyns stood about in crimson livery, their powdered wigs and powdered faces immaculate, unmoving as the statues that lined the halls outside. We had entered into a kind of receiving hall, dark wood and red walls hung with tapestries old as Empire. The floor was checkered black and white, so that with each step I felt myself the chessman more and more. Somewhere, distantly, a lute played, mournful and gay at once.

Another hall awaited us, another set of doors, this one only wood. Twin androgyns opened them, bending their necks before our coming. Selene shivered, and it was only then that I realized how cold it had become.

Nigh all the furniture that must have decorated that place had been cleared away. What little remained had been pushed aside, lined the walls. Only the antique piano remained in what seemed its proper place, on a riser at our right hand. There had been a similar instrument aboard *Radiant*

Dawn, I remembered—a relic out of Earth herself. This was not that piano, but it struck me that William seemed always to have one near at hand.

A canvas—half-finished—stood on an easel to the left, a palette and brushes resting on a stool to one side. I recognized the style at once. It was Vianello, the same Vianello who had painted the Emperor's coronation portrait a thousand years before. The same Vianello who had painted William's mother's portrait on the occasion of her ascent, and the portrait of Aurelian III before her, and Michael VII before him.

That *he* was present struck me as an ill omen. *What* he was painting was illness itself.

Selene gasped, put a hand to her mouth.

A machine awaited us, a gilded fugue creche, its glass surface rimed with frost. Banks of machinery accompanied it, consoles chiming, blinking blue and redly in the low light of the chamber, attended by a pair of scholiasts and a small man with a black skullcap who stood and offered a pained smile at the princess's distress. I thought him Chantry, at first, in his black clothes, but his fashion was of an antique style, not the neo-Egyptian cloth of that pagan clergy.

Nicephorus approached the creche, bowed deeply. "Radiant Majesty," it said, "I have brought Lord Marlowe, as you requested. And your daughter, Selene, has returned."

The man in the black cap punched a key on his console, muttered something to his scholiast associates, one of whom in turn dispatched a pair of androgyns to inspect other parts of the machine. I heard the faint whine of some machine turning on, just on the edge of hearing, and a voice—the flat, unaffected voice I had heard upon the bridge of *Demiurge*—issued from the machine. "*My daughter . . .*" The words came slowly. "*It does me good to see you well. When you vanished . . . I feared you would not return.*"

Does *me* good. *I* feared.

Not *us*. Not *we*.

They were William's words. The man's, and not the Emperor's.

It was not William's voice. The console spoke for him.

The man in the creche had not moved. Could not. The processes of his life were nigh all suspended, so that he floated at the brink of death. But the little doctor in his small cap and dark suit had devised a means by which to keep our drowsing Emperor awake. I might have marveled at such a machine, once. Not then. Not there.

I had eyes only for the poor soul inside it.

I understood why he had appeared to me as little more than a face, understood the graphical blurring and heavy makeup the Emperor had worn when last we'd spoken, and at the council. That face, that aquiline profile, that Imperial visage . . . was gone. The flesh of cheek and brow was mottled, swollen, stretched, as though with pus, and a terrible protrusion swelled the neck, making him look like some lopsided bullfrog. He floated naked, but for a loincloth that concealed where the catheters ran within, and so nigh every mutilation the plague had wrought upon his flesh was laid bare to my eye. Where once His Radiance had been trim and straight, broad shouldered and clean limbed despite his advanced age, the rot had changed him. A creature crabbed and twisted hung before me, skin scabrous with sores like weeping eyes, flesh mottled, the tissue beneath knotted and swollen. There were growths at his throat and under his arms and in his hips and knees.

But his left arm was the worst, no longer a limb, but a malformed club of tissue, more than twice as large as the right.

I thought Selene might collapse, and drew near to her. Her hand had not left her mouth. Her eyes had not left her father's face.

"Do not weep, dear girl," William said, his words so slow in coming. *"I have been a poor father."*

She shook her head. "You . . ." She swallowed. "You are the Emperor."

"I . . . wish . . . I knew you better," he said. *"You . . . and all your brothers and sisters. But it is too late. The doctor . . . Doctor Vrabel here tells me that but for the tank I have but weeks remaining to me, and perhaps less."*

"Days, my Emperor," said the doctor gently.

"I . . . wanted . . . hoped to see my people through this war. But Fate, it

seems, has other plans."

"You may yet live to see it done," I said, advancing to stand perhaps three paces from the glass. "I have brought the end."

"*So I hear,*" William said, and I realized he was blind, or at least could not see in the half-sleep of the tank. "*Eidyn was not yours to destroy.*"

"It was necessary to convince your son to stand his forces down," I said.

"*Do not lie to me, Hadrian,*" the Emperor said. "*You fired your weapon before you so much as spoke to my son.*"

I could not help but smile, knowing none save perhaps the doctor and his scholiasts would see. "I did what I thought right to avoid greater bloodshed."

"*No man doubts your conviction,*" said the Emperor. "*Only your sense of justice.*"

"You know it is not my justice," I said.

"*Perhaps not,*" said the Emperor. "*But if there truly is a god, if he truly has made this world, you will forgive me if I have grown to question his justice, too.*"

Acutely aware of Sir Verus and the other Excubitors at my back, I advanced toward the tank, studied the mottled and misshapen face that once had been so proud and straight. "Can he see me?" I asked, looking back at Nicephorus.

The genetic eunuch shook its head.

Doctor Vrabel spoke up, voice little more than a whisper. "It is all we can do to sustain cortical function in cryonic fugue. His Radiance can't even hear us. Tor Gall here must transcribe our words. The, ah, electrodes you see there, on his head? Those transmit our words from the console directly into the Emperor's brain. We can't even really call him conscious."

Selene was still weeping softly.

"Tell him the Cielcin are coming," I said.

The scholiast, Gall, tapped my words into the console. William's response came a moment later. "*Because you brought them.*"

"Better here than elsewhere," I said. "Don't you agree?"

A moment.

"I do." I found I could not look away. He reminded me of Orphan, in a way, of the newborn Orphan, whose flesh was likewise mottled and swollen. His malformed arm would not have been out of place on Brethren itself. *"But we should have been consulted."*

We again.

"There wasn't time," I said, voice nearly so flat as that of the Emperor himself. "Dorayaica nearly killed me."

Nicephorus exhaled, almost hissed, "Dorayaica?"

"You said Dorayaica was not present."

"Dharan-Tun was not present," I said. "Dorayaica was."

"You left this out of your report!" I could hear Nicephorus's scowl.

"Then why did you not use the Mericanii weapons?"

"Because of the *nature* of its presence!" I said, looking back over my shoulder to address the Lord Chamberlain as Tor Gall transcribed for the Emperor. Quickly then, I explained what had happened. How Dorayaica had appeared upon Danu's surface. How we had fought. I told him how Miudanar had manifested at last, how it had spoken through its host. How we had battled, and how I almost had been destroyed. But when it came to the moment when Cassandra had appeared, I hesitated, knowing that whatever I said would be her doom.

I took a slow, ragged breath. "I intended to use myself as bait."

"You intended to sacrifice yourself?" William asked, machines beeping softly all the while.

"Downcycle beta-wave stimulation," Vrabel whispered, tapping one display over the shoulder of one of his scholiast aides. "Minus point five hertz."

"I have twice given my life," I said, watching the doctor and his assistants. "Third time pays for all, they say. My life for Dorayaica's, and for the lives of its gods? That seemed a goodly trade to me."

"Then why didn't you?" asked Nicephorus.

"Why didn't you?" the Emperor's question came a half second later.

Upper teeth slid cross lower, two tectonic plates. I looked to Selene for support. "My daughter disobeyed my orders," I said. "She remained on the

planet. I could not fire the Mericanii weapon without killing her.” The princess was silent. Her eyes were on a nondescript spot of floor between my feet and hers, her face turned away from the ruin of her father.

Nicephorus cursed. “And so you’ve doomed us all instead.”

“Now you see why I did not have Bassander Lin include all this in his report?” I asked.

The Lord Chamberlain’s scowl deepened. “He will have to be removed from command,” it said. “We cannot have a strategos of the Legion more loyal to *you* than to the Empire.”

“You cannot have children,” I said to that man who was no man at all, “and so you cannot understand.”

“I do not need children to understand you, Marlowe,” the homunculus said. “You are no great enigma.”

“*Enough.*” William’s voice was like a bell. “*What is done is done.*” There was a pause as Vrabel and his subordinates adjusted some levels on their machine. “*Dorayaica knew you were coming. The question is how.*”

Nicephorus asked, “Do you believe Sagara’s deception with the telegraphs has been discovered?”

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“*You haven’t told him?*”

I looked up at the Emperor’s near-corpse. “Told me what?” Nicephorus’s eyes were almost black in that dimly lighted space, but for the shine off Vrabel’s consoles. “What is it?”

The Lord Chamberlain turned its back, advanced on an antique-looking globe whose five continents and narrow seas, I guessed, marked it as the planet Avalon. When it reached the globe, it stopped, turned. “Danu was only the tip of the spear,” it said. “We started receiving reports within weeks of the initial strike. Other attacks. One after another. World after world.”

I held my silence. It was better to let the creature speak.

“How many?” I snapped.

“It had been a hundred years since their last attack. *Exactly* one hundred years.”

“*How many*, Nicephorus?”

The Lord Chamberlain did not blink. “Three hundred thirty-six.”

Three hundred thirty-six. I felt my lips form the words, though no sound came out.

“Three hundred thirty-six what?” Selene was looking at us, having at last regained some measure of composure, though charcoal ran from eyes still red with tears.

“Planets,” I said. The Cielcin had struck three hundred thirty-six planets at once. “Danu was bait?” There had been other attacks. Earlier attacks. Parallel attacks. But only a few. Less than a dozen. Dharan-Tun had appeared early in Dorayaica’s offensive—then vanished.

It had meant to draw me out.

“*So it would seem.*” There was a pause, punctuated by the doctor’s muttering.

I followed their logic. If Dorayaica was aware that we were monitoring the movements of its fleet in real time, it might have used that knowledge against us. The attack on Danu might have been a feint designed to draw us out.

“There are other explanations,” I said. “The Watchers might have seen our coming. Or they might have been warned some other way: A spy here at court?”

Demoniacs all. That was what William had said when he wrote to me on Jadd, speaking of Minoan agents among his own counselors.

“A spy at court might as easily have disclosed the Latarran machine,” Nicephorus said. “The Latarrans might have been compromised themselves.”

“But have the Cielcin destroyed their telegraphs?” I asked.

Silence. Only the rattling of Tor Gall’s keys.

“*They have not.*”

“Surely they would have disabled the telegraphs by now if they knew we could monitor their location,” I said.

“Unless they’ve some other use for them,” said Nicephorus.

Three hundred thirty-six worlds.

“Dorayaica just set the galaxy on fire,” I said, “all to resupply, I

assume?”

“One presumes,” Nicephorus said.

“*Your actions at Danu may unwittingly . . . have been your ma-ma-masterstroke,*” the Emperor said, words broken, heavily artifactual.

“*Chara . . .*” Vrabel hissed, muttered. “Increase input to ought-point-nine.”

Gall and his fellow scholiast muttered compliance, while the doctor compressed his lips, watched gray faced.

“What’s wrong?” Selene asked.

“We risk waking him,” Vrabel said, adjusting his little hat with a nervous hand. “We have to maintain neural activity within a narrow band. Too low, and he sleeps. Too high, and we will have to revive him fully or risk greater damage. The machine requires constant calibration—constant calibration.”

I watched the scholiasts at their work, asked, “The Chantry allows all this?”

Vrabel smiled faintly. Nicephorus said, “You know better than to ask that question.”

Gall continued typing.

“*The Chantry is in no position to judge me.*”

I inhaled slowly. “You knew?”

“*I have always known,*” came the answer. “*The Choir has long tried to keep the Throne in the dark regarding their operations. Their shadow kingdom, as they call it. But I have known all my life.*”

“How?” I asked.

“*They tried to kill me.*” William’s face did not move.

He had learned their secret, and held it over their heads all the days of his life. He had built his own structures around himself. Created Special Security. Reinvigorated HAPSIS. Strengthened his dependency on the Martians, the scholiasts, all to keep the Chantry at bay . . . while outwardly painting himself as their good and pious servant. Well I recalled his vigil in the chapel in Venantian’s palace on Nessus, kneeling before the altar to Earth and Emperor. A posture. A performance.

“I . . . am Mankind,” William said. “I am Empire. Emperor. I rule. Should rule. Not the Chantry. Not the Council. Not my ministers. Me. That is what the people believe. My people . . . an-an-and they are my people.” The Emperor was silent a moment as Gall and Vrael adjusted their levels. *“Earlier you spoke of children. There is not a soul in my Imperium who is not one of mine. I have tried to be a father to them—to you all. An Emperor should be a father to his people. His people deserve a father. The Chantry would sooner cuckold me, as they had my mother, and her father before her. They would sooner a catamite sit the throne than a man—man they they they cannot control. I—”*

I watched Selene’s face as he spoke. Her weeping had stopped, been replaced by a pained smile.

“It is better this way,” the Emperor said. *“Better that the Cielcin come to us.”*

I felt a rush of relief at the Emperor’s words.

“Your failure at Danu may be a blessing in disguise.” Doctor Vrael moved out from behind the transcription console, examined another readout. *“Had you succeeded, there would still be the bulk of the Cielcin armada to contend with. Dorayaica would be defeated, but we would have returned to the status quo ante. A thousand little Cielcin fleets, all going their own way. If they are all coming here . . . if even a large par—par—par—part of their force is coming here . . . perhaps we can make an end of it.”*

“The Cielcin must be destroyed,” I said.

“Can it be done?” Nicephorus asked.

“Was my demonstration not sufficient?” I asked. *“The question is not whether it can be done. It is a question of how, and whether or not your legions can protect Demiurge—”*

“Like the Tavrosi protected you?” asked Nicephorus.

I met the eunuch’s gaze, found it cold and unflinching.

“Peace, Nicky,” William said, then, *“It is in no small part thanks to you, Hadrian, that I have held them back these many centuries. The clergy. The lords. Even my dear wife. Your . . . performance has served to keep—”*

keep keep them at bay. You have been a useful ally. My instrument, and my . . . friend."

My friend . . . The words were like a knell.

"Is that what I am?" I asked.

Nicephorus looked as though it might be ill.

Vrabel adjusted some knob on his enormous console.

"We Emperors have too few . . ." The Emperor's voice, still void of all human emotion, came halting and slow. His life had not been an easy one: nigh friendless and alone, surrounded all his days by enemies, a stranger to his wife, a rumor to his children. The object of veneration and terror to the nine quadrillion souls that called him *Radiance*.

He was not a man, as I have said. He was a monument. A colossus bestride all mankind.

So, too, am I.

Was there any man in all the galaxy who could look upon William the Great as an equal? Olorin could not, mighty though he was, nor any of the lords of the Commonwealth, or of the Small Kingdoms. Kharn Sagara might have done, being a colossus himself, but he was slain—or else was broken into ten thousand little shatterlings, each a pale shadow of the king.

He was, in a sense, a thing apart, an *isolate*, a species unto himself. Like Ragama. Like Ushara. Like I was, myself. But for all my difference, I had my companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage me . . . while William was solitary and abhorred. Beset on all sides. Surrounded by enemies all his days. Surrounded by vultures in his twilight.

Nearly surrounded.

The ailing Emperor had once piece left on his board. One piece.

One move.

But it was an outstanding one.

"You swore an oath to me, once," the Emperor said, voice still machine-dead.

I spoke swiftly, almost spoke over him. "That was a long time ago."

"I am not asking you to serve me," came the answer, so rapidly I hardly thought it a reply. *"I am asking you to serve for me."*

“What?” I stood a little straighter, peered up into the nearly dead face of the old Emperor.

“This machine prolongs my life. So long as I live, I am Emperor, but I cannot act as Emperor, not as I should. I—we—have it in mind to na-na-name you you auc—”

The machine squealed, was overcome by a burst of noise that put me in mind of Sabratha.

Poor Doctor Vrabel cursed again in that language I little recognized.

I had understood the Emperor perfectly all the same.

“Auctor?” I looked to Nicephorus, to Selene—the black tracks of tears still evident on her face. “Auctor?”

There had not been an auctor in thousands of years. The practice had been all but abolished, though it remained a theoretical possibility. It was an artifact of another time, an ancient time, from before the advent of quantum telegraphy, before the mass bureaucratization of the Imperial Office, and the instantiation of the Imperial Exarchates on Nessus, Ptolemy, and Tiryns. To be *auctor* was to be *avatar*, the image of the Imperial person in the flesh. An Imperial auctor spoke with the Emperor’s voice, ruled with the Emperor’s hand, was the Emperor in all but name—his perfect representative.

He was offering me the throne—or at least the chance to sit upon it.

Nicephorus looked as though it had drunk a vial full of acid, like it might be sick.

“Auctor?” Selene’s eyes were wide. “Father . . .”

“There is none I can trust. None better.”

“What of Alexander?”

No response.

I felt as though a meteor had struck *Aurora* a glancing blow, as though we were spinning, hurtling out of orbit. I was falling. We were all falling. The careful clockwork and crystal mechanisms of *cosmos*—of order itself—were cracking at the seams. It could not be real. It was not the Emperor who spoke through his machines—and that was what *they* would say—but

some daimon; that I had bewitched him with the praxis of Vorgossos and the arts my witch-woman had imparted to me.

"They will not accept me," I said.

"*They are not Empire,*" William said. "*Nicky, are you still with us?*"

Nicephorus bowed so deeply I thought its hat must fall, but it did not. "I am, Radiance."

"*Has the boy come up?*"

"He had just departed Din Airfield when we entered," the homunculus said. "Shall I go and check with Lord Captain Rice?"

"*Good.*" William's word was final. "*You will have him and the others brought in at once. We shall let them see true horror.*"

"Alexander?" Selene asked, unable to suppress the note of fear in her voice. "Alexander is coming here?"

"*Yes, girl.*"

Nicephorus bowed its way out of the chamber. "You're making a mistake, William," I said, looking upon that face deformed by growths like fungi white and crimson. "They will not listen to me."

"*There is not a one of them who would challenge you after what you did today.*"

"It is not a challenge I fear," I said, thinking of Samek, of Yod's face on the holograph at Alexander's ear.

"*Did not he who set me on my throne set you in your place?*"

I felt my eyes narrow. I did not speak, and so Tor Gall had nothing to relay through Doctor Vrael's machine. Was William aware of the passage of time? Did he know I had not replied, and for how long? I watched him in silence, awaiting Nicephorus's return. His red hair had grown long, floated about his face like slow fire, billowing in the cold fluid of sleep.

After the space of several heartbeats, I turned to the woman beside me, offered her a folded kerchief.

Wordless then, she took it, moved off to find a mirror.

Doctor Vrael was watching me, still stood at his console. "There's nothing you can do for him?" I asked.

"*This is what I can do,*" the other man said. "I've excised numerous

growths, and it may prove necessary to remove more before attempting to awaken him again. I can treat his symptoms—the cancer, in this case, but the virus . . . we’ve had some success with blocking viral implantation—there’s a solution one can apply to the mucus membranes that cuts one’s chances of contraction by almost ninety-five percent—but curing it? No. And he is still contagious, which complicates treatment.” Vrabel touched his hat nervously. “He speaks of you often, you know?”

I looked at the physician. He did look palatine to me, short as he was and round shouldered. “Whence come you, Doctor?”

The man stammered. “You’d not have heard of it, lordship.”

“He’s an adorator,” Selene said, having returned from the mirror, her face and dignity restored.

Vrabel bowed. “It is not rude to say that I am a Jew, Highness,” he said, but returned his attention to me. “There is hardly a conversation that goes by in which His Radiance does not mention you.”

I looked on the man, surprised. His presence, I thought, was yet another sign of the Emperor’s careful planning. It made sense. He was not loyal to the Chantry, did not hold to their beliefs. Could not. Who then, could be safer to minister to an ailing Emperor, one who had held the Chantry at bay for more than a thousand years?

“Is he conscious?” I asked, inclining my head to the sleeping Emperor.

“No,” Vrabel said, shaking his head almost violently. “No, no. The machine stimulates the neural tissue. It simulates neural activity artificially, so that while it is activated, the Emperor is effectively conscious. Do you understand?”

“He has no awareness of the passage of time,” I said.

“If the machine is not running,” Vrabel said. “But he will have memories of this exchange when he is decanted—if he is decanted. But they will seem fragmentary.”

“You can’t just run the machine?” I asked.

“Not without risking neural damage,” Vrabel said. “In truth, we risk neural damage utilizing the machine at all, but the Emperor insisted . . .”

I returned my attention to the monarch’s deformed face. “That sounds

like him . . .”

The doors opened then and Selene, the doctor, and I all turned to witness the arrival of the Emperor’s guests. Nicephorus stood at the fore, stepped aside as it entered the chamber to stand beside the Knights Excubitor who had held the door.

And there he was, white armored, white helmeted, white cape with red beneath, himself bracketed by a pair of Excubitors in suits of mirrored silver.

My squire. My failure.

The prince.

Behind him came a cloud of witnesses. Men and women, scholiasts and logothetes and lords. I marked Sir Gray Rinehart among them, the Director of the Legion Intelligence Office, and a Martian officer I took for Lord Rice. Tor Xanthippus of the Security Council stood among them, his long white hair combed back, breast heavy with the chains of his office. There was Prince Matthias, who had brought Selene to Gododdin from Latarra, alongside three red-haired and lovely princesses I did not know. And there was Kaim-Olorin, Prince of Jadd—new come from the muster at Tenba, his black-and-gold filigreed mask firmly in place. Behind him came the men of the Legion, officers in black and silver. Strategos Koparkar had come, and Amata Rempel.

And there *he* was, right at her side. The Cantor, Yod. A specter in fuliginous black.

The throng shifted and muttered where it stood on the fine carpet. The princesses all averted their eyes, unable to bear the sight of their father.

Prince Alexander did not bow, did not seem surprised by his father’s state. His eyes were hard as stone, sharp as fangs. “Are you proud of yourself?”

“*Silence!*”

The Emperor’s voice broke over the chamber like a wave, and it was only then—when the sound of it, like thunder, cowed those lords of the Imperium—that I realized who that iron voice reminded me of.

Kharn Sagara.

So like the flat, false voice of his machines it was.

"This feud of yours must end," the Emperor said. *"I would have you make peace here, now, for the sake of this old man."*

The prince's eyes widened, then narrowed to mere slits. "Father, this man just *destroyed* a planet! There were *men* on Eidyn!"

"He would not have had to act had you been prepared to receive him as a brother."

"A brother? Him?" Alexander reached up with both hands to remove his red-crested helm. "He's a creature of the Extrasolarians! A traitor!"

"You know that he is not," William said. *"He has set a trap for the Cielcin, and he has done so with my blessing."*

That sent a thrill, a paroxysm of shock through the crowd—and through me. I turned my head to the tank, and it took all my self-control not to blurt out the word *What?*

"What has passed between you both ends here," William said. *"The enemy is coming. My people, Alexander, your people, need you both. We need every tool at our disposal, every ally we can find. We need Lord Marlowe's weapons."*

Alexander thrust his helm in the direction of one androgyn squire, then advanced until he stood beside me. "Father, this is madness."

"Enough!" Vrabel's machine chose that moment to malfunction, and so the Emperor's word repeated again and again. *"Enough! Enough! Enough!"*

Alexander drew back a step. Green eyes like daggers raked my face. "If you are truly our man," he said, "you will hand over your ship. These weapons. Give them to us."

"I cannot allow the arsenal to fall into the wrong hands."

"You think your hands are the right ones?" Alexander asked.

Selene had had enough. "You launched an attack against us!" she exclaimed, stepping forward. "Lex, you started this!"

"Us, is it?" asked Alexander. "You and him? Is it that good, sister?"

Selene's hand lanced out, struck Alexander across the face. She said

nothing, only glared, so that when the prince looked at her—one hand on his stinging cheek—he met a creature of alabaster and red fire.

His eyes moved to mine. “Fight me for it.”

“What?”

“Single combat,” he said. “Monomachy. No tricks. No sorcery. Just you and me.”

His words astonished me, and I confess my mouth hung open half a moment. “I won’t fight you, Alexander.”

“Coward!” Alexander’s hand was on the hilt of his sword. “You insulted me!”

I blinked at him. I had apologized, years and years ago.

“I demand satisfaction!” Alexander said.

“I said enough, boy!” The Emperor’s voice rang out louder than before. *“I have called you here—all of you—to bear bear bear witness to my design. Now hear this: I, William the Twenty-Third of the Av-Av-Aventine House; Emperor of Man Man Mankind; Firstborn Son of Earth; Guardian of the So-So-So—Sovereign of the Kingdom of Windsor-in-Exile; Prince Imperator of the Arms of Orion, of Sagittar-tar-tarius, of Perseus, and Centaurus—rand Strategos of the Legions of of of the Sun; Supreme Lord of the Cities of Forum; North Star Star Star Star Star—Palatine; Defender of the Children of of of of of the Servants of Earth, upon my name name name and throne do decree that Hadrian, Son of Alistair of the House Marlowe, be elevated to the office of Auctor of the Imp-Imp-Imp-Imperium. To serve as my hand, to speak with my voice my voice my voice, to exercise all my power and authority.”*

“What?”

“I am dying,” the Emperor said, voice seemingly more stable. *“Every one of you you you can see. Lord Marlowe knows the enemy better than any of you. It was on my orders that he disclosed the location of this fortress to the enemy. We will meet them here, and crush the Cielcin at once.”*

Still I marveled at him, but had the sense to remain silent. At a stroke, the Emperor had once more taken me under his protection, and set me

above my enemies at the same time. Who could gainsay him? Not a one. Not even Yod.

He did not even know my plan—none of them did.

“*Alexander,*” the Emperor said. “*Lay down this feud, for my my my sake.*”

The prince hesitated—though William would never know it. He looked at me, at his sister, at Nicephorus . . .

. . . at Yod.

“I . . .” He shook his head. I felt some sympathy for him. “You have bewitched him,” he said at last. “This machine . . .”

Doctor Vrabel interjected. “That is quite impossible, Your Highness.”

“Shut up!” Alexander snapped.

Then Olorin spoke. “The Principalities of Jadd delight to hear of the anointing of the Auctor.”

A murmur went through the crowd of witnesses then, a kind of seismic shift. Olorin’s words had been a blessing, the stamp of legitimacy, the recognition of the Empire’s staunchest ally. Nicephorus had included him on purpose—the only foreigner in all those gathered there.

“Fine,” Alexander said at last. “Fine. I accept. I accept your apology.”

His eyes were dead as those of a shark.

“We have a war to win.”

“We do,” I said, and offered the prince my hand. “I would have peace between us, brother.”

“Brother?” Alexander sneered. His hand was still on his sword hilt. His eyes were on Selene, raked her up and down. “Brother, indeed.” He touched his cheek. “You may have my sister’s love, but you will not have the throne.”

I blinked at him. “I do not want the throne,” I said coldly, pitched my voice for all those gathered there to hear. “I have come back to you for one reason, and for one reason alone: to end the war. When it is over, I will leave these stars, and take my ship and my people far from here.” I directed those final words at Yod, held his beetle-black gaze with my own. “This will be the last you ever hear from me.”

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CHAPTER 49

AUCTOR OF THE IMPERIUM

THE RAMP OPENED, PERMITTING the day—a line of fire—to stream in from the world outside. The light of my sun shone through that widening gap, illuminating the mirrored helm of the guards before me, while a stiff wind lifted their luminous white cloaks. Sir Aulus—a captain of the Excubitors—emitted a whistle from the speakers in his suit, prompting his fellows to kindle their highmatter swords.

I had eyes only for Cassandra.

She stood before them, armored in Imperial white, her *mandyas* overtop, its empty sleeve fluttering like the red wing of some seraph, her short hair a halo of darkest black. Her one hand rested on the brass of her sword, and the air about her shimmered with shield-fire.

Outside, a trumpet played, its clear music piercing the noise of the guttering winds, the whine of hydraulics, the hammering of my own heart.

Then it started. The notes of a lone guitar welled up in challenge, its sound defiant in celebration. The rest of the band joined in: Strings. Drums. Horns. The Imperial anthem.

It played for me.

The ramp met ground, and already Cassandra—my herald—was halfway down its length. I found myself remembering the arrival of Prince Aranata’s herald—that white-clad xenobite with its spear. How strange, I thought, that that practice—so particular—should transcend the line between our species.

Cassandra raised her voice, its clear sound and Jaddian accent filling the yard outside. Selene had coached her on precisely what to say, and she said it perfectly.

“In the name of His Imperial Radiance, the Emperor William the

Twenty-Third of the Aventine House; Firstborn Son of Earth; Guardian of the Solar System; King of Avalon; Lord Sovereign of the Kingdom of Windsor-in-Exile; Prince Imperator of the Arms of Orion, of Sagittarius, of Perseus; and Centaurus; Conqueror of Norma; Grand Strategos of the Legions of the Sun; Supreme Lord of the Cities of Forum; North Star of the Constellations of the Blood Palatine; Defender of the Children of Men; and Servant of the Servants of Earth . . . His Imperial Shadow, His Avatar, the Lord Auctor, Hadrian of the House Marlowe, whose hand is His Hand, whose voice is His Voice!”

The princess had pushed me to include my own titles, but I had refused. I had divested myself of all those titles—had indeed divested myself of even my name—when I cast my armor and the Grass Crown at Aurelian’s feet.

Behind her as she spoke, my guards advanced: fully ten of the Knights Excubitor, mirrored knights in surcoats and cloaks of radiant white, their gleaming blades held before them, bright as stars. They formed ranks to either side, five and five, so that I passed between them, Annaz just behind, his men filling out the rest of my honor guard. As I came out under the sun of Gododdin, I halted, shaded my eyes.

The morn was bright and gray, the light colorless where it passed through tangled cloud, while beyond the shapes of our armada—like *fata morgana*—moved beyond the sky. I could see them, shadows like the shadows of fish, marching grid-like in their swift orbits beyond the circles of the world. A line of hightowers had been erected since I’d departed for Danu, stood anchored to towers erected far out in what had been the Sea of Grass. These were forever in the business of ferrying resources and refugees to and from orbit. I marked the carriages of three just starting their climbs, and prayed they were laden with families bound for better stars.

Still shading my eyes, I turned to face the sun, lingered for just a moment.

Then a flier streaked overhead, and brought me back to myself. The wind of its passage tossed my streaming hair about my face, lifted my new cloak, the cape I had been given in token of my new rank. Black as my hair

it was, as night, and secured by a magnetic brooch fashioned in the image of the Imperial sun.

“Lord Shadow!” The man who greeted me wore Martian red and gold with the icon of Mars and her twin moons embossed upon his breastplate. His was the typical Martian phenotype: freakish tall and lanky, the war-world’s weaker gravity offset by hormones and genetic engineering. His face was scarred: a stone block roughly hewn. I had seen his likeness once before, on the holograph at Alexander’s shoulder. He saluted. “I am Lord Amon Kosis, Supreme Legate of the Martian Legions.”

I acknowledged the salute with a raised hand. “An honor, Legate. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“No, Lord Shadow,” Kosis said. “I was on patrol on the borders of the system on the occasion of your last visit here, and prior to that I was out-system entirely. May I say it is an honor?” He extended a hand.

Recalling Samek, I looked at the hand askance a moment, ultimately took it. The Martian kanarang attempted to crush my hand in his. I held firm, smiling the while. Surprised—*impressed?*—Amon Kosis released me. “The Prince Regent ordered that I receive you personally, and convey you to the War Council at once.”

I studied the man’s weathered rock of a face a moment. He was almost certainly one of Alexander’s—though I did not think him an agent of the Chantry. The Martians did not adhere to the Cult of Earth, worshipped instead the Emperor as a living god. But that such a man was likely not in hock to the Chantry did not mean he was my ally.

Was the man’s presence, then, a threat? Or had he insisted on coming himself, desiring to see the Halfmortal in the flesh?

“Very good, Supreme Legate,” I said, and gestured ahead of myself, back to where the white tower of Fort Din rose like a sword above us, its crown and battlements bristling with antennas and other comms equipment like a thicket of spears.

It was to that tower we were bound, escorted by Kosis and his Martian Guard, through the wall that encircled the landing pad and up a broad, white stair to the main massing of the original fortress. The legate did not speak

the whole time, but led us through the doors into the tower itself. With every step, I was conscious of the eyes on me: men and women, soldiers and civil servants, all of them muttering, whispering, bending knees and necks to the person I had become.

The Emperor's Shadow.

His Avatar.

The Auctor of the Imperium.

The War Council had gathered in a shielded chamber almost at the tower's top, a level or two beneath the communications nest. That high chamber recalled for me the place of the Imperial Council on Forum, with its ring table encircling a sunken, empty patch of floor beneath the glass-black convexity of the projection suite, like the lens of an enormous eye. The Imperial sun shone on gonfalons hung about the walls, red on white. There were no windows, for the chamber was set right in the heart of the tower, and was accessed only by a trio of hallways like narrow shafts through the encircling wall. No signal, no transmission could pierce that chamber, save that which arrived by hard line, or by quantum telegraph alone.

The Supreme Legate went ahead of me. Cassandra followed, accompanied by two legionnaires carrying the *flabella*, the feathered staffs that announced the coming of the Emperor.

I heard Cassandra shout, "His Imperial Shadow, the Lord Auctor!"

The Excubitors entered ahead of me, two by two, and fanned out to either side. No music this time, no note of horn or trumpet, no "Far Beyond the Sun."

Thus I entered the council chamber: in total silence.

Total and absolute.

The council table formed rings about me, rising in levels like the seats in a coliseum. Every eye was on me, each belonging to a man of station and renown. There was Prince Kaim-Olorin, seated with his admiral, Serpico, and Captain Azhar and Captain Afsharirad, and more officers I could not name. There was Paeon of the Dryads, and the Emperor of the Nipponese. There were the Strategoi: Rempel and Koparkar, Bartosz and Kern and

Settecase, and Bassander Lin. There were the lords of the Small Kingdoms, and there the princes of what remained of the Norman stars. There was old Sir Gray Rinehart, Director of Legion Intelligence, and there Tor Xanthippus and the green-robed scholiasts of the Imperial Council. Princes there were, red haired and white, seated on the uppermost level, and princesses, too. I spied Prince Matthias, who had been sent to Latarra to retrieve Selene all those years ago, and others whose faces I knew, whose names I could not recall—there were so many.

But my eyes were fixed on the seat opposite the doors. The high seat. My seat.

It was already occupied, as I knew it would be.

Amon Kosis had gone ahead of me, had already taken his place at the occupant's right hand.

Prince Alexander did not stand, but spread his hands on the table before himself—his solar-crested helm on the table between them—and said, “Father's Shadow you may be, but that cloak cannot cover your crimes. You are a traitor, Marlowe. A murderer, and a demoniac, too. You have declared war on the Imperium. Destroyed a planet. Killed Ohannes Douro. Taken the lives of *thousands* of Imperial subjects—and worse, by your own admission—you have compromised the security of this base and betrayed our location to the enemy!”

I was surprised at the control in the prince's voice. Gone was the shrieking, shrilling petulance of his youth. What remained was cold fire, the mettle of a man.

“That is worse, is it?” I passed Cassandra, who had halted by the left-hand terminus of the council table, and stepped out onto the central floor as though it were the arena, as though it were the black desert at the heart of Akterumu.

Alexander sat above me, Kosis at his right. But it was the man at his left who drew my attention, clad as he was in black, his head bare, his eyes lost behind a muslin band dark as night.

Another Chantryman. An Archprior—or worse.

Of the Cantor, Yod, there was no sign.

“It is worse that I have given your location to the enemy than that I was forced to slay Lord Douro and all his men?” I asked, thumbs hooked into my belt. “Are you all such cowards here? You call me *traitor*, but it seems to me you all are traitors. How many worlds have you let go to the Cielcin while you camped here and did *nothing*?”

No answer. “I am surprised, I confess, to see a Lord of the Chantry seated with such honor here. Surely, word of what they are has reached you all. You say I am a demoniac. It is a lie. But *he*”—I thrust a finger at the man seated to Alexander’s left—“has cozened you all. His order would have you believe the daimon machines of old are all destroyed, when in truth they have rebuilt them themselves! For themselves! You call me *traitor*. Why? Because I slew Ohannes Douro? Douro was their puppet! Their familiar! They tried to frame me for the breakdown of our alliance with the Extrasolarians! At the same time, they claim I am an agent of the Extrasolarians. Well, which is it?”

The silence that followed these words was neither total nor absolute, was filled instead with countless voices, muttering.

But if I thought I had cornered the Chantry man, I was disappointed. “You are what you have always been, Lord Marlowe,” the prior decreed, voice flat and cold as the artificial cadence of the Emperor himself, “a man acting in his own interest.”

“My own interest?” I said. “You think that’s what this is? You think I want to be here? Doing this? Surrounded by all you . . . fine people?”

“You wanted the Extrasolarian weapons for yourself,” the clergyman said. “You want the throne, and now you find yourself standing in its shadow. That cloak you wear . . . it is an insult to every good and decent man you’ve slain to earn it.”

“This cloak”—I seized the hem of the garment Nicephorus had given me, bared its argentine lining—“is the only thing shielding me from the likes of you!” I balled it in my fist, advancing on the lord of the Cult of Earth. “I know what you are, sorcerer! You and yours have governed mankind long enough!”

“Is that a threat?” The black-armored cleric leaned forward. “You claim

innocence in one breath, shout your guilt in the next.”

“That’s enough, snake!” I said. “I know your secrets. Shall I tell them all?”

Had the priest grown tense?

“Shall I tell them of the City of the Pyramids?” I asked, a walking shadow beneath the prince and his counselors. “On the shores of the Potomac? In the light of man’s true sun—”

“That’s enough!” the priest snapped.

I had scored my point.

“Lord Tarquin?” asked Prince Alexander. “Prince-Prior, what is this?”

Prince-Prior?

Though I could not see them, I knew Tarquin’s eyes were fixed on me. I felt their gaze as a kind of pressure, as a solar sail feels the touch of sunlight. He knew what I knew. *That* I knew. That the Earth was green again and peopled—that it had never been unpeopled, and that it was the Chantry’s province and private preserve. I had shocked the priest *severely*, shattered his composure, for I spoke of things deeper and more secret than nearly anything in man’s universe.

“Have you heard enough?” I asked.

“How can you . . . ?” Tarquin sat back, utterly overmastered. “How can you know?”

I let him sit, and understand the threat I held over him, the guillotine poised to fall. I had only to reveal the Earth’s survival. Then. There. In the face of all the galaxy. I might have done it, might have pulled the mask then from his face and shown it to all the cosmos, as I had done in the Eternal City, when I lay the daimon called Ship at the feet of Prince Aurelian.

Why then did I not?

Because it was not my purpose.

“I am not here for you,” I said, praying that I had the black priest trapped. “My quarrel is with the Cielcin, and with the powers that they serve.” I was standing just beneath Lord Tarquin then. “So I will warn you only this once, priest: Do not get in my way.” I looked up then, peered

directly into the panoptic camera housed in the convexity in the roof above. Yod was watching and all his Choir with him.

Slowly, I brought my attention round to the council at large. “The enemy is coming. They will soon be at our door.”

“Because you brought them to us!” shouted Leonid Bartosz, his chair striking the riser at his back as he stood.

His motion tore the seal from the mouths of all those in council. The chamber exploded in a chaos of fury and sound. Men stood, shouted, hurled accusations down on me like so much refuse.

“You saw what he did to Eidyn!” one roared.

“He wants us to trust him?”

“He’s a traitor! A killer!”

“Murderer!” cried one blond lord clad in blue and gold.

“He dares call us cowards!” shouted another, “After he turned tail at Danu!”

My supporters answered them, Bassander Lin first of all. The strategos tore his white cap from his head. “You weren’t there, Lord Van!” he said.

“—did everything he could!” said Captain Watts.

“The Tavrosi are dead! All dead!”

“—destroyed nine worldships! Nine!”

“This is some joke—it has to be!” Strategos Koparkar was standing alongside Bartosz, gestured down at me with an open hand. “An auctor? There hasn’t been an auctor in more than ten thousand years! What is William thinking?”

“Have a care, Koparkar!” said Bassander Lin. “That is your Emperor you speak of!”

“I cannot accept this!” shouted one of the lesser lords. “He isn’t human!”

“He’s a homunculus!” cried another. “An Extrasolarian slave!”

“He should be hanged!” said a third.

“He’s a hero is what he is!” shouted one of the marcher lords on the highest level. “Have you forgotten Aptucca? Berenike?”

I raised one hand.

My defenders noticed me first, and one by one they stood down, resumed their seats. Their example—and the sudden diminution in the chaos—shamed the others into line. One by one they fell, resumed their seats, until the hall again fell almost silent. Alexander had turned his helmet half to face him in the chaos, had nearly taken it up.

“My prince,” I began, and swept my gaze about the hall, coming to rest on the masked face of Kaim-Olorin, “honored lords, despite the failure of our mission, we nevertheless struck the enemy a great blow. We left fully *nine* of their worldships in ruins . . .” I turned as I spoke, addressing each part of the chamber in turn. “You yourselves have seen now firsthand the destructive capabilities of the weapons at my disposal. Now hear this: The device I brought to bear upon Eidyn is the among the very least in our arsenal.”

“If that is so,” said Amon Kosis, “then why is it you were forced to retreat at Danu?”

I looked up at the Martian leader. It was a fair question.

Still, I hesitated to answer it, for to give the man his answer was to forever change the nature of man’s world.

We’ve reached the end of history . . . That was what William had said to me, when at last I’d spoken to him over the telegraph at Forum. *We walk in myth again, as in the beginning.*

“The Cielcin have a weapon of their own,” I said, and fixed my eye upon him, upon Alexander, upon Tarquin. “One more terrible than anything you can imagine.”

Kosis’s rough face settled somewhere between amusement and a sneer. “What does that mean?”

“A god.”

Those two words were like the dropping of stones into still water. One could feel the unease—the bemusement, the disbelief in the men—about me like ripples. Only Lin and his people and the Jaddians were unmoved.

“A what?” Kosis laughed, looked to his fellow triumvirs for reassurance. “What is this?”

“Strategos Koparkar is right!” said Leonid Bartosz, tugging on his

pointed chin-beard. “This is some kind of joke!”

“There are no gods but Earth and Emperor!” said a lord in livery I did not know.

“Would that it were so,” said I, and drew forth the thing I had brought to show them.

It was a quartz wafer—little larger than a hurasam—its interior shot through with fractal veins whose patterns held the thing I had come to show them all. Holding it aloft, I crossed the empty floor to stand before the Jaddians. As I drew level with them, the prince inclined his head. I offered my old friend a pained smile, acknowledged Azhar and Afsharirad before I placed the chip on the tabletop.

Drivers deep in the table recognized the presence of the crystal, and a faint light shone from below. I tapped readouts that appeared in the surface, activated the chamber’s holography suite.

The room darkened, and an image formed on the air. It showed the planet Danu—a part of it, at least—its cracked face weeping molten stone. I let the image speak, said nothing, drew back against the table, the Jaddians behind me. We were looking out of one of *Tempest*’s hull cameras, out over a portion of the ship’s starboard side at a sliver of the battle in orbit—the battle I had missed.

Bassander Lin had kept his ships in close formation, hoping their greater mass might serve to draw fire away from the much smaller, nimbler, and more deadly Tavrosi vessels. It was a strategy that had served them well to start. Satha Kull and his people had sown destruction among the ships of the Cielcin fleet, destroying countless lesser vessels, annihilating the first wave of boarding craft the Pale had set against *Tempest* and *Demiurge* alike. Moon after false moon rose above the limn of the planet before them, weapons fire streaking across the void between. The Tavrosi ships made themselves known as streaks of flame in the distance, and by the destruction they left in their wake.

It was as though a fault opened in the void itself, a crack like a bolt of lightning forked across the emptiness, shining like a ray of fire. Yet it was neither lightning nor fire, for both those things required air, a medium in

which to burn. The very foam of space was burning, curling back like paper consumed by flame. It stretched for miles, shining with a light bright as any sun.

A break in reality itself.

Like the bolt of *Artemision* it was, but where that weapon traced a line of darkness, this was radiance itself, a place where the light that lay beyond ordinary space fell in. More an aurora it seemed a moment later, not a beam, but a sheet of light unfurling like a fiery banner. And it *moved*, coiling, undulating like a snake against the background of planet and stars.

Then a ray of light sprang from it, reaching cross the void toward the nearest of Bassander's ships. It did not move like any ordinary beam of light, but bent—as if it were a serpent indeed, stooping over its prey. Then its tip opened like a flower—

—like the fingers of some almighty hand.

A great, celestial *hand* shone plain against the dark, its fingers huge as ships themselves.

Many times when I was a boy, Gibson had shown me a map of the cosmos at its fullest extent. The *cosmic web*, he had called it, and traced the tracks of galaxies with the tip of his cane. To the magi who had built that model, the large-scale structures of reality resembled nothing so much as the threads of a spider's web, galactic filaments like strands of silk swaying in the solar wind, gossamer threads ten billion light-years long and thousands wide, whole galaxies like motes of dew.

To me, they looked like the nerves in a man's body, like the veins of that cosmic hand. Cords of light like that web of the distant-most stars wrapped around the fuselage of our destroyer as it crushed the vessel in its fingers. For a clarion instant, I saw that hand—Ushara's hand—lift that vessel from its course as easily as a child might lift a toy boat out of his bath. Then the ship exploded, and a brief sun shone in Danu's sky and whited out our camera.

Cassandra was watching me from the far side of the terrible image, the light of that dying ship reflected in her eyes. For a terrifying instant, I

thought to see the demon's shadow reflected there, saw only my daughter. Her sorrow and pain.

The angle on the recording changed, showed the same moment from another of the ships in Lin's fleet. The luminous hand shot out across the void and seized our black ship by its prow and crushed it—and as it did, still more arms snaked from the gleaming body of the serpent, its countless fingers unfurling.

All was deadly silent in the high hall.

A moment later, that veil of light and cloud parted, revealed the *thing* I had seen in the skies above Sabratha: the wheels turning, the countless eyes, the clockwork machinery vast as continents turning in the skies over Danu like a ship mightier even than *Demiurge* itself.

Ushara! Ushara! Ushara!

The wheeled creature stretched out hands like rays of darkness—each veined with golden fire—and grasped at our ships. One by one she seized the far-off Tavrosi vessels and crushed them in her hands. The death of each gave birth to its own short sun, brief flashes like lightning, like fire upon the deep.

All while she laid waste to the minds of the men aboard my ship.

I tapped the gleaming readout beside the chip I'd placed on the table, halted the image.

Ushara's jeweled bulk hung in the air above me, black as black and gold, her eyes red rimmed as if with fire, though they each seemed carved from stone. The image had frozen with the image of one gleaming arm stretched out toward one far-off ship, so that we were treated to a view of the hand.

I said nothing, let the truth and horror of what they had seen play out in every heart and mind. The men about me—great lords and generals, princes and fools—sat in silent awe. Slowly, like the cracking of ice at the coming of some long-awaited spring, they started moving, shifting uncomfortably where they sat. They put their heads together, muttering, muttering.

"What . . ." asked one of the junior men, hesitating, "What is that?"

I directed my words to Alexander, to Kosis and Tarquin—and to the Cantor, Yod, wherever he was hiding. "*That*," I said, "is the enemy. The real

enemy.” I held Tarquin’s gaze a long moment, sensed the pressure of his unseen eyes. “Honored lords!” I said, “You have been deceived—all of you! All your lives, you have been taught that ours is the eldest civilization in the galaxy. That we were *first*. It is a lie.”

Tarquin was smiling, his lips pressed together.

“You are looking at what the Cielcin call a *Watcher*,” I said. “*Caihanaru*, in their tongue, from an older word, *Kairosh*, from which they derive their own name: *Kielkishunna*, *Cielcin*.” I looked to Amon Kosis. “Literally: a god.”

“But what *is it*, exactly?” asked King Paeon of the Dryads, tugging on his coarse red beard. “Some kind of warship? A machine?”

Had I not thought much the same when first I’d seen it? Turning in the skies above Phanamhara?

“It’s an . . . organism,” I said, hesitating. The word was not precisely right—there was nothing organic about the Watchers at all, no matter what shape they assumed.

“Then they can be killed,” said Amon Kosis. I was shocked to see *surprise* on the Martian legate’s face. I looked to Alexander. His face was impassive as stone, as was that of Lord Tarquin—though the Prince-Prior had the benefit of his blindfold. They both had known: the priest and the prince. The former was no surprise, but the latter?

William must have told Alexander, read him in to the deeper secrets, the higher mysteries. And should he not? The prince was to rule, all agreed. Did his possession of this secret knowledge all but guarantee that fate, I wondered? Did it ensure his ascension?

How much did he know?

“The creature had no fixed physical form,” I said. “What you’re looking at is something of a shell. The Watcher’s true form exists as a pattern in energy, a signal, if you will.”

“A signal?” asked Amon Kosis, brows contracting.

“This is absurd!” said the blond lord in blue and gold who had spoken earlier. “We cannot seriously be entertaining this . . . this tripe!”

I thought I must know the speaker, so familiar did he seem. There was a

quality in his broad, leonine face that put me in mind of old friends. His hair was long, pulled tightly back and secured in a knot like an artist's brush. He wore fierce side whiskers, bristling things that terminated only at the corners of his mouth, leaving the lips and chin bare, and his heavy brows made him seem equal parts owl and lion at once.

"Do I know you, lord?" I asked, certain that I did not.

It was only then I marked the device on the azure toga he wore over his gilded *musculata*.

The fleur-de-lis.

"You knew my cousin, I believe," said the man. "Lord Augustin Bourbon? You murdered him!"

A ripple of shock and gross discomfiture impacted the council.

House Bourbon.

But it was another lord the man reminded me of: Izemrasen, the Prince of Oannos, in all that blue and gold, though Izemrasen's hide had been black almost as jet.

"Lord Bourbon?" I asked.

"Prince Bourbon," said he. "I am Alphonse, son of Edmond, son of Charles, Prince of Verehaut."

Livy . . . Gibson's voice, nearly his last words, resounded in my ears. Charles had been his brother, the brother he'd betrayed.

"You look like his brother," I said, voice a breath of dead air, "your grandfather's brother, I mean."

Indeed, he might have been Gibson. How had I not seen it at once? But for the width of the face—they might have been brothers themselves.

Prince Alphonse bridled. "How dare you!" Gibson—Prince Phillippe—had been a traitor, had staged a revolt against his own brother, and been sentenced to Belusha, and thence into internal exile . . . a poor scholiast, stripped of rank, of title, of his very name. "Prince Regent, are we seriously going to entertain this lunatic? Have we forgotten Vorgossos? The fate of Lord Douro? Have we forgotten what he just did to Eidyn?" Prince Alphonse thrust a finger at the sky, at the void beyond. "Lord Marlowe is a

criminal! And this”—he gestured at the image of Ushara still painted on the air—“I do not believe it.”

“Sit down, Bourbon,” Alexander’s voice came down like a blow.

The golden prince hesitated. “Prince Regent . . .” he said, preparing to protest. “You can’t possibly believe this . . . this—”

Alexander lifted his helm from the table before him and slammed it back down like a praetor’s gavel. “I said *sit down*.”

The prince seemed bent by some unseen weight. “Lord Marlowe is many things,” he said at last, and his eyes turned slowly to me, “but he is no liar.” He looked to Tarquin, raised his eyes to the black dome of the projection suite overhead. “These things he says are true.”

It was as though a wave of clear, dark water crashed through the council hall, and the men about me all were flotsam. I looked up at the prince in wonderment. But when his eyes found mine, they were hard and cold, their jade frosted over.

“*Sore nara,*” said a familiar deep, quiet voice, “*kono kamigami ni taikou suru tame ni, dono you na taisaku o koujireba ii no ka hanashiau to ii deshou.*”

The man who had spoken sat on the lowest tier of the arena, half a quarter turn from Prince Kaim’s place, dressed in a wide-sleeved black coat. The man beside him rose, himself dressed in black, and said, “His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor Yushuhito, suggests that our efforts may be better directed toward discussing what may be done about these . . . creatures.”

I knew enough to know that he had not translated his liege’s words accurately.

The word *kamigami* meant *spirits*.

Gods.

Yushuhito himself had not moved, sat between his aide and another man whose vestments—unlike those of that lesser emperor—glittered with commendations.

Bassander Lin stood. “They can be killed,” he said. “As Lord Marlowe indicated, the creatures exist in energy—as patterns in energy. A sufficiently

large energetic wave is theoretically able to disrupt the creature's . . . signal, you might say."

"*Ooi to wa?*" asked Yshuhito, when his man had translated Lin's words.

How large?

"Larger than any single weapon can achieve," I said, holding up my hands so the fingers overlapped. "The weapons must be timed—phased—so that the pulses amplify one another, and they must be repeated. A sequence of approximately one-point-five-million volt-per-cubit pulses sustained over the course of at least *thirty-three seconds* is theoretically able to kill—disorder—these things."

"One-point-five *million?*" said Strategos Rempel, echoing the number. It was an incredible sum.

"Theoretically?" asked Amon Kosis, cutting over her.

"HAPSIS has had some success in the past," I said. Nairi was still classified, but I was the Imperial Auctor. My speech was law, and to speak no crime at all. "But their results have not been reproduced. I attempted a . . . variation on the method at Sabratha. Some years ago."

The scarred titan of a legate frowned. "And?"

"He failed." Prince Alexander's eyes had been on me the entire time, I was sure of it. "Didn't you, *Lord Shadow?*"

I matched the prince's glare, held it for the space of a heartbeat. "The weapons I had at my disposal then were insufficient to the task," I said. "No more."

"You're referring to what you did to the planet Eidyn?" asked Strategos Amata Rempel.

"What I did to Eidyn was but the smallest part of the power I now have at my command," I said.

"Yet you stand before us a failure," said that dark, flat voice again, the voice of Lord Tarquin. "You failed to defeat this . . . thing, failed to destroy the Cielcin fleet."

Bassander Lin bridled. "With respect, Reverence, you weren't there."

Tarquin turned hidden eyes on Lin. That unseen gaze might have

withered any lesser man—so haunting strange it was—but Lin had faced the mightiest of the Iedyr and lived to speak of it, and seen the dead return.

Believer that he was in Earth's promises, he did not bend before the Prince-Prior, and said, "We could not have prepared for the scale and nature of the attack. The creature did far more than destroy our ships. It attacked our own people, turned them against us . . . drove them mad."

Another murmur filled the hall at this pronouncement. Bemusement. Disbelief.

"Drove them mad?" said one Norman president, still unbelieving.

"A psychic attack," Lin said.

"There's no such thing!" said Tor Xanthippus.

Lin squared his shoulders. "Respectfully, Chief Counselor, you have seen my reports. Internal footage from aboard *Tempest*. Holographs of the bodies."

"But you are talking about *telepathy*!" the scholiast said, unable to conceal his contempt—a total failure of the scholiast's *apatheia*. "There must be some other explanation. A virus, perhaps. Some Cielcin weapon."

"Whatever the cause, Chief Counselor," Lin said, unperturbed, "the fact remains, we were forced to contend with our people at the same time as we fought the enemy! You have seen the black-box data from the Tavrosi ships yourself! They *turned* on one another. Attacked one another as much as they attacked the enemy. Grand Admiral Kull was destroyed by his own men!"

"How can we fight an enemy whose tactics—whose *weapons* we cannot understand?" asked the prince of some small kingdom. "We have no defense!"

"If what you say is true," said Leonid Bartosz, "what will happen when that *thing* gets to this system?" The vulpine officer was gray as Death, face sunken with new fear.

"What shall we do?" asked a voice from the highest level.

"How shall we defend ourselves?"

Fearing tensions in the council hall would once again boil over, I signaled Sir Aulus and—as a unit—the Excubitors, *my* Excubitors, stamped

their booted feet, a call for order more decisive than the fasces of the lictor there at arms.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Kindled highmatter flickered in the dim light of the holograph, shone on the mirrored faces and cuirasses of my own Imperial Guard. As if on cue, Cassandra shouted, “Order! Silence! Silence!”

I removed the quartz wafer from the tabletop, killed Ushara’s image. At once the room’s right lighting was restored, and all were made to remember just who it was in charge.

The Auctor of the Imperium stepped into the center of the chamber, made of himself a fixed star. And the star was myself, so that the lords of the Imperium and her allies—even Prince Alexander himself—were made my vassals and satellites. Alexander would have been wiser to cede the throne. The presence of the Excubitors was a declaration solid as steel, a reminder where the power and will of the Emperor—the true, still-living Emperor—lay.

In me.

“The coming days will be crucial,” I said, almost whispering, forcing the others to lean in. It was my father’s trick. “Each of you will have his part to play.”

Thinking of my father gave me pause, and I hesitated. I had played the accuser already. Did I dare do so again?

Why not? The devil was my house’s sigil, after all.

“We have sat idle far too long. *You* have sat idle. You say I am a traitor. A failure and a killer. What then are you, who have sat safe and comfortable here on Gododdin while the galaxy rots and burns?”

“We had our orders!” said Bartosz.

“As I have mine!” I snapped, wheeling, rounding on that coward who had faltered at Berenike when the day was darkest. “As I have *had* mine. Who can deny all I have done? *I* slew Aranata Otiolo! Bested Venatimn Ulurani! I was at Sybaris, Senuessa, and Berenike! I exposed the treachery of the Commonwealth, uncovered the threat of the *lethovirus*! I led the mission to rescue the Emperor at Perfugium, I—” Here I faltered, just for a

moment. I had seen Cassandra, turned to look at her just as I spoke the name of *Perfugium*, that hateful place. I composed myself. “I *am* Auctor of the Imperium. The Emperor’s Shadow. His Hand. His Word. Now hear those words. *His* words: We have reached the end of history. We walk in myth once more! The enemy we face is unlike any we men have known! Not since the Foundation War have we faced so great a threat. The Cielcin are coming with all their strength. A thousand worldships—and more—their gods come with them. Whether you believe it or no: They are coming. You have seen the proof!” I thrust a finger at the hanging dome above. “Deny it at your peril—at all our peril!”

A crackling silence greeted these words, electric. I let it spark and smoke, and it seemed wreckage fell about my feet, crashed to pieces on the floor all around. I eyed Alexander and his fellow triumvirs: the legate, Kosis; and Lord Tarquin. They three formed the locus of my opposition. The prince. The Martians. The Chantry.

Had I muzzled the priest with my threat to expose the inmost secret of his order, more dire and more dear even than the revelation that they were all of them *demoniacs*, all of them guilty of the same abominations they punished wherever else they were found?

To my surprise, it was not Alexander who spoke—but Amon Kosis. He turned his leathered head, leaned forward, and asked Lord Tarquin, “Why was this a secret?”

The Prince-Prior opened his mouth.

I signaled.

Sir Aulus and his companions stamped again. Again. Again. “Because,” I said, speaking for the black priest, “your ignorance was useful. Has been useful . . . to your real master. Your *secret* masters. Is that not right, Lord Tarquin?”

The black priest was silent.

“The truth can no longer be hidden!” I said, shouting. “The galaxy is not *ours*. The *universe* is not ours! But a place has been prepared for us in it! The Cielcin would take it from us. The Watchers would take it! They will

not rest—neither of them—until all is burned away! It falls to us to stop them! Here, now, at Gododdin.”

Again the electric silence.

I let it stretch, felt it slipping through my fingers like a braided cord.

“What then shall we do?” asked Bassander Lin, breaking that cord in his hands.

“The coming days will be crucial!” I said, addressing the chamber at large. “We must make ready. Marshall our defenses, harden the system against attack . . . but of all else, Gododdin must empty!”

“What?” asked the castellan of Fort Din. “There are nearly two billion people still on this world!”

“And every one of them stands in the path of the flood!” I said. “Your efforts to deliver them to other worlds have not been enough! They must leave! Every one of them! When the Cielcin arrive, let them find only our armada . . .” I thought of Laxman, and young William, and the rest. More than any other, I thought of the poor woman dead upon the airlock floor, and feared what would become of those who remained behind.

“But, Lord Shadow!” the castellan said, “So many!”

“You have your orders, Castellan!” I roared. “The enemy is coming. Soon they will be here. Let us make ready . . . and pray.”

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CHAPTER 50

AMPHISBAENA

“IT WON’T BE ENOUGH,” I said, and leaned against the rolled steel of the railing that overlooked the lower terraces of Fort Din and the cancerous mass of the camps where they swarmed against the perimeter fences like the wreckage of so many broken ships.

It would be several seconds before Edouard’s reply could come down from orbit, and so I meditated on the line of towers rising from the planet’s surface, retreating from the city far enough that their procession revealed the planet’s curvature by the changing angle of their cables—thin as hairs—that rose up into the darkness beyond the roof of day.

“I know,” came Edouard’s reply at last, four—five seconds later.

Demiurge circled Gododdin at a great remove. Beyond the hightower stations, beyond the orbital defense satellites. Beyond the ships of the Imperial fleet.

“It’s been four months already,” I said, sparing a glance for the quartet of Excubitors at guard along the rear wall of the balcony, as good as statues. “There are just too many of them, Edouard. Too many people . . . even if we could commit every ship, tower, and launch cannon to the evacuation—”

I broke off.

Five seconds passed before Edouard could finish my thought for me.

“There isn’t enough time.”

“They should have evacuated this place a hundred years ago,” I said.

“Maybe so,” said Edouard, “but they couldn’t have known that we’d be bringing the fight to them.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “They should have better prepared. The armada has been here for decades, as has His Radiance. Only secrecy has shielded this place for so long.”

When the HAPSIS man did not reply at once, I knew that I had scored a point, but I took no joy in it. A wind scoured the battlements, lifted the countless flags of Empire that decorated the fortress—white and red—like a flock of birds above the drab buildings.

“They still don’t understand what’s coming,” he said at length.

“I showed them!” I replied the instant Edouard’s message came in over my comms. “Ushara! The battle!”

“You’ve done all you can do, my lord,” said he. “We are doing all we can.”

It was my turn to pause, to watch the ceaseless movement of the place around me. The gears and levers of that machine called *war* forever turning, grinding toward that future I prayed would never come.

“It’s not enough,” said I. “Every one of them that remains here will die, Edouard.”

Silence.

For a moment, I feared some failure of the comm, some intrusion on the part of Tarquin, or Yod, or their men. We did not often speak of *Astrophage*, forever fearing that we would be discovered. The transmission was encrypted, but it *was* broadcast, not tightbeamed from my suit to the black ship far, far away. It could be intercepted. Once more I turned, studied the ramparts of the tower behind me, half expecting to see Yod crouched there, squatting among the merlons like some hideous gargoyle, one hand cupped about his ear.

“There has to be a better way,” came the HAPSIS man’s reply.

“There isn’t,” I said. “You know what we’re up against. What all is at stake.”

Silence. Another pause.

“And if the Cielcin simply pass us by?” Edouard asked. “If they make for Forum? Or Old Earth? What then?”

It stank of iodine inside my helmet from the antivirals.

“They won’t,” I said.

“You’re sure of that, are you?”

I wasn’t. I could well believe Dorayaica might yet pass us by. Forum

was too tempting a target for it, and with the knowledge that the Emperor and the bulk of the fleet were elsewhere . . . it was possible the Prophet might instead strike at the heart of man's dominion before it turned and set its sights on us. But in doing do, it would weaken its forces. Even if it were victorious in battle at Forum or at Earth, it would not be without a cost.

"They may think I am dead," I said, peering up into the colorless sky. "Ushara may still think she killed me. And Cassandra, I . . ." I faltered. It was possible the Watchers knew better, possible that they had been among us. "If they do . . . they may be overconfident."

Edouard did not respond at once. I could picture him standing upon *Demiurge's* bridge, his arms crossed, his shoulders bent, fingers turning the little crucifix he always wore.

"If you are wrong," he said, "the Eternal City will burn."

"It may burn anyway," I said.

"The Emperor?"

"There's been no word from him in weeks," I said. "His physicians say the process of simulating consciousness can risk scarification of the neuronal tissue. They're trying to keep its use to a minimum . . ." I studied my Excubitors: Sir Aulus, Sir Marcus, Sir Gaius, Sir Antonius.

My Excubitors.

It was madness. All of it.

"Vrabel tells me they'll have to operate once he is revived," I said, continuing. "There's a mass in his chest pressuring his lungs." A frigate was moving overhead like some lowering thunderhead, its shadow passing over the world.

"Damn them!" he cursed. "These Extras—God damn them! They should fight like men, not like—whatever they are. Not like this."

I had seen the sick myself, visited the lazarets, where hundreds lay in narrow cots, their arms grown long as serpents, bent and twisted, many-jointed as the arms of Brethren once had been. Physics and their technicians moved between the rows in padded white suits, their faces plain behind glass blisters as they ministered to the dead and dying, hushed voices hardly to be heard above the beeping of instruments.

The Minoan plague did not kill quickly—it was not meant to. It first changed the afflicted, made itself known by pains like the pains of puberty, the ache of stretching bone. The first growth was rapid—when it came—so that in a matter of days one limb might grow several inches, or the head swell as William’s had. Rapid weight loss followed, as the body metabolized healthy tissue to fuel new growth. Great mucinous tumors began to grow next, swelling at a rate of five, eight, ten pounds per week, until the growth was crippling, and the afflicted could no longer move. The lazar might grow new fingers, toes. Neotenous limbs might begin development along the growth plates, bone sprouting awkwardly from bone, while elsewhere new bone might develop *inside* the muscle fibers, so that the afflicted was slowly prisoned in a cage of his own bones. In time, the lazar could no longer move, could no longer eat, or breathe without assistance. He died gasping, a prisoner in his own flesh, crushed by the weight of his tumescence, if he did not first starve to death.

Watching the physicians move along the rank and file of the damned, I imagined the pyramids on Earth of old, the soldiers of the God Emperor cutting down the doors with their plasma arcs to find the crawling order within. The daimons had tended their human charges with care, kept them alive, pruned them like fruit trees, that their brains might host the machines themselves—and that their hosts might live forever.

The Minoans, by contrast, sowed death indiscriminate.

“How are things on the ship?” I asked.

Edouard’s reply took the usual several seconds. “Quiet.” I imagined him turning, regarding the likely empty bridge. “Still no sign of trouble from our friends in black.”

“They got aboard without our noticing the last time,” I said, “and we’ve far fewer men now.”

Silence. A gentle wind lifted my cape, its air thick with the virus that had claimed so many lives. Its presence threw my awareness of the armor that prisoned me into sharp relief. The hermetic airlocks on every building, the stink of iodine.

“I’ve set Ramanathanu to guard the computer core,” said A2 at last.

“Orphan says the . . . the brain is fully recovered.” I could hear him mutter something in either Latin or his arcane French before he said, “You’re certain we should be using these things?”

“The weapons?” I asked.

Silence.

“The ship,” Edouard said. “It isn’t . . . right.”

Silence.

“You have some other suggestion?” I asked.

Silence.

I understood his hesitation. The heart and mind of *Demiurge* were made from human cells. Though it was not truly sentient, not fully alive, it was close—not so unlike the homunculi men bred for serfdom, even in the Empire. What private thoughts passed in its hobbled brain? Did any?

“Just be vigilant. There’s a Cantor here, don’t forget—at least one.”

“If they come aboard, we’ll know about it,” Edouard said. “Ramanthanu and Otomno take turns, and I have my own men with them. They hardly need to sleep, you know?”

“I’d noticed that,” I said. “And the child?”

“What child?” he laughed. “It’s practically full-grown.”

Otomno’s get had taken its first steps as soon as it had finished its first meal, and by the end of its first year—before we had even reached Gododdin—it stood nigh so tall as Victor and any of the other children of Danu. But it could not speak, not more than a few words. The Pale matured quickly, as made sense. They were hunters, predators, and had need of eye and claw. But *will*, it seemed, came slowly. I could picture the thing, standing with its . . . parents as Cassandra and I departed for the surface. It had been hardly a head shorter than Ramanthanu even then, but thin, terribly thin, a beast of cord and bone, its horns just starting to bud, its lank hair loose about its shoulders.

The door opened behind me, and another masked and suited figure stood there.

“I have to go,” I said. “The prince is here.”

Silence.

“Understood,” Edouard said. “Give Cassandra my regards.”

“I shall,” I said, and killed the comm.

Prince Kaim du Otranto stood in the doorway, dressed in black and gold, his Jaddian armor intricately styled, articulated ceramic plates scored with scrawling Jaddian script invoking the protection of Ahura Mazda. In lieu of his red-and-golden *mandyas*, he wore a regal garment sewn of peacock feathers—celadon and cerulean. They fluttered in the wind as he emerged, his trio of gilt sword handles shining at his belt like stars.

“Watching the lifts?” he asked, moving with the grace of a panther as he approached the rail.

“How did you guess?”

“I do the same,” said he, “whenever I’m down here. It does not matter how many of them I am seeing—they never seem to me quite real.” He shook his helmeted head. “Nothing that tall should stand.”

I knew what he meant. Strictly speaking, the lift towers did not stand—not above the first half mile or so. Heavy weights at each anchor station held the lines taut. Without them, each tower cable—thousands of miles of whiskered nanocarbon—would come coiling down to earth. Still, the towers were too tall, too thin—like black faults in the sky, in reality itself, cables stretching seemingly to infinity. They put me in mind of *Artemision*, the way its black bolt clove space itself.

“There is something very strange about them,” I allowed at last. “They do *look* impossible. It’s odd . . .” My voice faltered. “Such an achievement, and they’re still not enough.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Olorin said. “We’ve offered three of our largest ships to the relief effort, but at the rate things are going . . .”

“Nine lift towers,” I said, inclining my head, arms crossed. “Two thousand passengers per lift. Three days to complete one transit—up and down. That’s thirty-six thousand men a week—assuming every one of those towers is focused on the refugees, which they’re not.” I turned my head to regard my Jaddian friend. “There are two billion people on this planet—not counting the legionnaires we brought from offworld. *Two billion people*, Olorin.”

The Prince of Jadd just stood there, a solid presence. “There are children being born in the camps each day. Our efforts to see them all to safety cannot be keeping pace with nature, mm? We might play this game for all eternity and still lose.”

“I have been here too long already,” I said. “Four months. The Cielcin won’t be long now. I’d wager we have less than a year.”

“That little time?” The mask on his helmet was different than the one he wore in court. It did not articulate, and it hid his eyes behind black mirrors little different from my own. Indeed, we might have seemed brothers then, both carapaced in black: me in Sollan style, him in Jaddian, breastplate dominated by the round lamellar plates that evoked the *dark moon* that was his personal badge. “I came to tell you your fleet is blocking my ships from docking at the anchor stations.”

“Blocking them?”

“I am having a fleet of hospital barges ready to receive and process the people from the surface,” he said. “I have three carrier ships preparing to take refugees to Tenba, Ptolemy, or wherever else. Each can carry some . . . eighty thousand? Ninety? But they will not let us dock.”

“Why not?”

“Their own ships are docked,” Olorin said, peering up into the sky. “*Taking on supplies*, they say, only they’ve not moved in days.”

I looked sharply at the other man. “You think they’re stalling?”

The prince said nothing.

“Why would they do that?”

There *were* other things that required the use of the towers beyond the deliverance of the planet’s people. Namely: food. Nigh half as many men there were in orbit above Gododdin as on its surface.

They had to eat.

“You think it’s deliberate?”

“I don’t know,” the prince said, “but it is not helping.”

“These damn fools . . .” I said, fingers wringing the rail before me. “Sometimes I envy the Cielcin. They have a unity of purpose we will never

have.” Olorin stood beside me, a shadow in the corner of my eye. Below, the war machine was moving, always moving.

As below, so above.

I looked skyward, to where our ships passed like the shadows of fish upon still waters. “Every one of them sailing to this system wants us dead, Olorin, and we can’t even decide if we *want* to save ourselves.”

“We can bypass the towers,” Olorin said. “Land the hospitals on the surface.”

“We may have to,” I said, studying the field beyond the camps. “But not before we harden the landing field. There’ll be a run on any ships that make landfall. Alexander’s men have had to strengthen the guard on the towers as is. And there’s the matter of containment.”

Olorin leaned heavily against the rail, feathers ruffling. “We’re prepared for the virus.”

“All the same,” I said. “We want to avoid a riot. This planet is a tinderbox, my friend. Landing those ships on the tarmac would be like dousing the whole thing in liquid hydrogen. We need a better plan.” Agitated, I pushed away from the rail, put my hands on my hips. “If you had told me—all those years ago, on Emesh—if you had told me we would both be *here* . . .” I shook my head. “I would have refused to go.”

The other man turned and looked at me, his face concealed by his mask.

“You really think so?” he asked. “You?”

I turned away, found the Excubitors all facing me. Aulus. Marcus. Gaius. Antonius. Each an Imperial mirror reflecting my own dark visage. I had become the image I had seen in the Howling Dark, clad in armorial black. The face beneath that mask was the face I had seen in my visions, the face of the man made young again by the Quiet’s fire. Was it fate?

Break the egg . . .

“What do you know of the *fravashi*, Hadrian?” Olorin asked.

“The soul?”

“*Non non non*,” Olorin said, waving a hand. “The *fravashi* is not the soul—that is a common Imperial mistake.” He raised a finger, pointed

heavenward. “It is the *spirit*, the part of the spirit that remains always with the God, even when we enter this world.”

“You know I don’t believe—”

“I do not care what you believe,” said Kaim-Olorin. “I am telling you what I know to be true, mm? Your spirit *chose* this. For you. For yourself. The God chose for you a purpose, and you accepted it. You made to him a vow. *Here I am*, you said. *I will go*. I know this because you are here. Because if you had refused, he would not have sent you. It is the Dark One who speaks of refusing the call, of serving only yourself. I have known you all your life. You have not refused the call.”

“You think we exist before we are born?” I asked.

“Is God not *Ya Abadah*, *Ya Abi-anjam*?” he asked, citing two of the names of the ancient deity.

Without beginning, without end.

“Is he not eternal?” Olorin asked. “Does he not then know every second of time before time’s beginning? Does he not know who will answer *yes* and who *no*? Did you not exist in his mind before ever you quickened in your father’s tank?”

Break the egg . . .

The voice whispered deep in my soul, the memory of that impossible day, that time at the end of time.

Mystagogues and mages, theologians and fools all had tried to reconcile these two things since the very dawn of man’s thought: that a god might be omniscient, and man still free to choose. I knew the answer, did I not? I, who have seen the breadth of time unrolled before me like a blanket, like a carpet welcoming the conqueror home. To see all things meant not only to see what would happen, but what would not. How many times had I come to that cradle? How many times might I shatter the egg? He had seen them all, known them all, and chosen me anyway, knowing I might fail, and fail utterly. Because while there might be an infinity of choices, those choices were yet bounded by my will. I might have come to that cradle ten trillion times, and never spared the godling in his egg.

But I had been chosen for my role because he knew I *would* not break it.

“It’s not quite like that,” I said, not looking at him. “But I see your point.”

Was there any difference between the spirit pre-existing the body’s conception? And a thought existing in the mind of the Absolute? Olorin’s god was not the Absolute, but he was an idea *like* unto the Absolute, an image of him, a little icon made by human hands in the image of he-that-is. Perhaps the Absolute had shown himself to Zarathustra, long ago, as he had revealed himself to the God Emperor in the person of the Hidden One.

I looked to Olorin at last. He was so near the truth, but he had not grasped it. Still, his faith had brought him near the mark. Near enough that we might walk together, stand side by side as brothers.

“I—” My fingers brushed an object at my belt, found something there I’d forgotten was there Unclipping it, I said, “I have something for you.” I held out my hand, fingers at once numb with . . . what? Not fear.

Sorrow?

Shame?

Olorin looked at the thing I offered him. His sword. Her craft was honest and clean, the hilt wrapped in leather so red it was almost black, her pommel and fittings of plated silver, with a single finger loop in her emitter near the mouth whence the newborn blade would spring. The weight of it was like a curse, as though a heavy stone hung from cords wound about my wrist. Still, I held it out for him to take.

“*Madha esna ta?*” he asked, sliding back into his mother tongue.

“You gave this to me to make peace. I failed.” I extended my arm more fully. “Take it.”

“You said that you lost it,” he said. “That Dorayaica took it.”

“I took it back.”

“*Madha?*” Olorin drew back. “How? When?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, and thinking of Lorian, added, “I’ll tell you another time.”

Well I could picture the other man’s eyes narrow with inquisition. My friend he might have been, but Kaim-Olorin was yet the prince of Jadd, and

a viper in man's shape. "Another time," he said, and—raising his hand—forced my own hand down. "It was a gift, *mi sadji*."

I protested. "There is no peace to make. Not with the Watchers."

"The Lord of Wisdom makes no peace with Ahriman. He destroys him," said Kaim-Olorin, and laid a hand upon my shoulder. "I gave you a sword, did I not?" His hand fell, and he looked away, out over the fortress beneath the colorless sky. "I knew it might come to this—if not *how* it might . . ." The wind lifted his peacock-feathered cloak. "When one has lived with faith so long, to have it *confirmed*—"

"Your god is a dream, Olorin," I said, speaking over him. "The Absolute is not your Ahura Mazda, however much you'd like him to be."

Olorin shook his head and shrugged, raising empty hands. "I have my revelations. You have yours."

"They are not the same!" I said. "*We* are not the same! I have *seen* him, Olorin! With my own eyes! I have spoken with him! He is *not* your god. He is not Edouard's god, nor the Earth the Chantry worships! Do you understand?"

The prince let his hands fall but slowly.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't see it?" he said. "This thing that you have done? Hadrian, you have answered the greatest questions we men have *ever* asked. You have seen the life that comes after death! You have *spoken* to God!"

"It is not your god," I said.

"Gah!" Olorin threw up his hands. "You do not listen! He is *our* God, is he not? Does he not fight for us?"

"He's sent me," I said.

The prince fixed me with his mirror-eyed stare. "Then it is well I gave you a sword," he said. "I fear you will soon be needing it."

Turning his back on me, he gripped the rail once more, looked out over the fortress and the camps to where the hightowers rose, black cracks in the face of day. "We cannot sit idly by and do nothing for these people."

I drew up beside him. "There are three thousand Danuan refugees on

board my ship,” I said. “I have promised them my protection, but I cannot protect them here.”

“Can you not send them with the rest?”

“They were witness to the fighting at Danu,” I said, looking studiously down at the fortress below, knowing that what I said was madness. “Victims of the Watcher’s psychic attack. They know nothing. They are of no value to anyone, but if I hand them over to the Imperium, the Chantry *will* take them.”

“Do you want me to take them?” he asked.

“I—” I hadn’t expected him to offer. Would life on Jadd be better? “No.”

They would become pawns. Chips in some political game. And the Jaddians might experiment on the poor redlings themselves. Olorin was an honorable man, and old Aldia was an honorable man, but there were other men—less honorable—among the princes of Jadd. And there was the *Yahmazi* to consider. Jaddian intelligence. The Jaddians were far behind the Empire where matters of the supernatural were concerned . . . what would they not do to close the gap?

The darkness around me drew ever nearer, the circle tightening like the coils of a serpent—like a noose—about my neck.

I am alone, I thought.

“No, Olorin, thank you, I . . . I do not know what to do.”

“If my ships can be permitted to land—”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, we should do that.”

The serpent wound a little tighter.

There was no escape.

CHAPTER 51

PILLARS OF FIRE

SEEN FROM BELOW, FORT Din was like a mountain, a white castle—overgrown with the black thickets of antennas and sensory equipment like some invasive weed—that towered over what once had been the Sea of Grass. The bromos fields were gone, pushed back inch by inch toward the hinterlands.

Where once there had been farmland beneath Catraeth far as the eye could see, now there was only a desert of concrete. The nosecones of lifter rockets rose not far off, peering over the lips of their cothons like the first shoots of spring. But it was the fleet of new-come ships that drew my attention, each a curving whale shape all of black and gold, with swollen, rounded prows that put me in mind of the head of the great terranic cachalot.

The soldiers that streamed from them and milled about them were garbed in Jaddian white and azure, their plate of mirrored chrome. Their pointed helms glinted in the light of the distant giant and its twin reflectors, as did their spears.

“How many can you take at once?” I asked, looking to Kaim-Olorin, who stood with me on the stand erected for the occasion, with his retinue beside him.

The prince looked to Admiral Serpico—fully suited and wearing an officer’s blue kaftan. The admiral replied, saying, “On this trip? Just over one hundred thousand.”

“Three trips, then,” I said, sparing a glance for Cassandra, at my side.

“A little more, Lord Shadow,” said the Jaddian commander. “We have capacity for three hundred thirty thousand.”

“Three hundred thirty-five, sir,” said Captain Afsharirad, speaking from

his master's elbow.

"Three hundred thirty-five," Serpico agreed, wobbling his head in Jaddian agreement. "We have transferred what personnel we may off the ships to allow for greater carrying capacity."

Three hundred thirty-five thousand . . .

It was not enough.

"Very good, Admiral," I said, turning as a horn sounded in the foremost Jaddian vessel, a deep-throated, ululating call that sent a thrill through the crowd beyond the fences at our backs. They were cheering. They were pleading. Men held their children aloft, or else wore them on their shoulders that the little ones might see better the coming of the ships that were to be their salvation. Women clutched babes to themselves, and sobbed. All clung to the chain fence, rattling it against the posts the engineering corps had hastily driven into the tarmac.

The engineers had erected a triple line of fencing between the camp and the landing field, set up checkpoints and syndromic response stations at intervals in order to screen departures for the rot.

But for a few madmen and the farmers whom the Legions forced to stay on their land and work, nigh all the planet had poured into the cities. To Catraeth, and Port Aneirin, and Bannog in the deep south. To Dinogad and far Riata. Every city on the planet had been overrun by those desperate to flee, so that each had become a crucible for the plague.

I looked at the faces of the men and women beyond the fence, each stained by the iodine antivirals the legionnaires had been ordered to distribute among the people. Stains shone at tear ducts and nostrils, leaving tracks the color of rust.

"Abba?" Cassandra's hand was on my arm.

I shook myself, realized that I had been staring.

"It's still not enough," I said.

The landing field stood on the lowest ground, beneath the bluffs where Catraeth and the proud fortress stood, in what once had been the basin of a warm and shallow sea. Its flat terrain had made it wonderful farmland, and the ideal site for the landing field when the time for that construction had

come. But it meant the camps rose somewhat about us, on the lowest slopes of the rise on which the city had been built, so that I could see the ramshackle hutments, the prefabricated housing units and storage pods and lean-tos wrought from sheet metal and other bits of scrap. Fences crowned with razor wire and marked by sentry towers lined the border of the airfield. Even from so far off, I could spy the men at their posts, and the huge sonic cannons they had there to pacify the refugees forever at the ready.

“There are more than forty million people here,” I said. “Just in *this* city alone, and more come every day.”

“We can do only what we can,” said the prince beside me. “God forgive us.”

I gave the Legion men the proper sign. The noise of horns went up, and I heard the broadcast of the officers crackling in my ear as they ordered the gates be readied and the refugees chivvied through. The ones already on the margins of the landing field would be brought through the triple fences, queued, and checked a final time for signs of infection before they were hurried through the checkpoint—a series of white-tarped pavilions—to the Jaddian vessels that awaited them.

The whole thing had been thrown together in a matter of weeks. The painted arrows that showed the people where to go and where to stand, that demarcated the various no-go zones and warned off trespassers, had all been put down hastily, with crude stencils.

“We could fit every person on this planet on board *Demiurge*,” I muttered to Cassandra, speaking over our private band, that the Jaddians and the soldiers gathered around us might not overhear.

“What good would that do?” she asked.

I nodded wearily. *Demiurge* could not be their salvation, doomed as it was to play its part in the very center of the coming violence.

“I’ve killed them,” I said, watching the first crush of people enter the pavilion before us. “Every one of them. I gave Dorayaica this place . . .”

“Not these,” Cassandra said, moving close enough that her shoulder knocked me in the arm.

“You know what I mean,” I said, watching as two triases of men in

legionary white and red forced the foremost of the refugees into a line. I saw a family—a man, his wife, their daughter; each face stained with orpiment—ushered into the pavilion. They would be cleared, stamped, catalogued for the long journey to come.

It was likely—most likely—that every one of them would be deposited in one of the old colonial storehouses, such as the one beneath Resonno on Perfugium, where Valka had lost her life. It might be centuries before that family woke again.

Or it might be never.

The family was cleared, and permitted to pass the pavilion toward the first of the hospital ships. They carried nothing—that I remember clearly. No bag, no earthly possessions. The father—how I wish I knew his name!—spurred his wife and child before him, one hand gently laid on each of their shoulders. The Jaddian mamluks, inhumans all, stood apart from them to mount the ramp.

I watched them go, my own daughter beside me.

The family was gone, and behind them a group of unwashed youths—boys all—followed by another family, five children: two girls, three boys—then another, and another, and another. Once on board the Jaddian ships, they would be passed through sonic scrubbers, asked to discard their clothes and assent to further processing. The garments would be incinerated.

They would not be placed in cryonic fugue until they reached the carriers in orbit.

“God willing, the first ships will be loaded by nightfall,” said the prince, peacock-feather cloak fluttering in the ceaseless wind.

His words brought me back to myself, and I turned, looked round. We’d been positioned on stands overlooking the checkpoint pavilion, facing the exit, so that those cleared by the Legion medical personnel might see us standing there—the Lords of the Imperium and of Jadd—above them.

“Every one we save is a victory,” I said, more to remind myself than anything.

“Halfmortal!” a voice from below cried out. “Halfmortal! Halfmortal!”

A man had emerged from the tent below, wrist stamped with a tag that

described his identity and his fate. He had a head of shaggy hair and the face of a common laborer, but he fell to his knees, and raised his arms in supplication.

“Thank you!” he said, still kneeling. “Mael is my name! Son of Winoc! Remember it!”

The legionnaires nearest advanced and spurred him roughly to his feet. But the man’s eyes never left my face. They were wide, and bright, and blue as the sky of Earth.

I raised my hand.

“I will remember this day, lord!” he said. “All my life, I swear it! I will tell my children! And their children! I will tell them how you saved us!”

He looked back over his shoulder, still watching as he was given into the hands of the mamluks and escorted up the ramp.

I will tell my children how you saved us.

But Olorin had saved them. I had brought the enemy to their door.

I seized my auctor’s cloak to stop it fluttering in the wind, raised my hand for the next group of people who passed, feeling myself glued to the spot. All my life, I had tried to escape this, precisely *this*. Those who have no power lust for it, as a man alone lusts for his own harem, not understanding the truth of that object of his desire. Obtaining his harem, the man finds himself pulled apart by the demands of his women. He may satisfy himself, but that satisfaction lasts mere moments, while his women are never satisfied, and ask of him more and more until he wishes he were alone once more.

Power is no freedom—unless the man who exercises that power is a monster, and even then, he is free only for a time, for no man is free from consequence. It is a prison, a golden cage, as I have said many times. I had tried all my life to escape that cage.

I wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. I wanted it to be over. The battle, the war, wanted to be back on Jadd with my daughter, wanted to watch her marry and grow.

“Stop him!” The amplified voice of a legionnaire went up, and I saw a

man in faded grays emerge from the pavilion. He pelted for the nearest personnel carrier.

A shot rang out. I saw a bolt of blue light slice the air. A stunner beam. The running man fell in an instant, cut down midstride.

“Containment!” shouted one of the guards, “Get containment!”

“He’s sick?” Cassandra asked. “I thought they were checking?”

“It’s never easy,” I said, watching the legionnaires surround the fallen man. The containment team was already hurrying from inside the pavilion, carrying the pod on a stretcher.

As we watched, they slid the stunned man into the open pod and sealed it.

“Won’t he get the others sick?” asked Cassandra.

“There’s a chance,” said Kaim-Olorin, overhearing. “But the contagion takes days to develop. We have time to be getting everyone into fugue up in orbit. We can check them all again once they’re frozen.”

“It would be a mercy to leave the sick on ice,” said Adraiano Azhar, speaking for the first time that day.

“It would be a mercy,” I agreed. *To sleep.*

But the sick would not be put on ice, not when the healthy might take their place.

“What will become of him?” Cassandra asked.

“He’ll be taken to the lazaret,” I said, referring to the hospital camp kept apart from the rest of the refugees, away from the landing field.

She knew there was no cure.

“Perhaps we *should* just be freezing them,” said Kaim-Olorin. “The infection can’t spread if they’re all on ice.”

“Xanthippus and his people gamed that scenario,” I said. “We’ll run out of creches before we can halt the spread. And the risk of the disease propagating throughout the fleet far exceeds the benefits here on the ground.”

As bad as the plague was, it was essentially confined to the planet itself. The men assigned to the planet by and large did not return to the fleet in orbit, with the exception of certain high lords like myself, and but for food

shipments there was as little direct contact between the fleet and the surface as could be allowed.

“There must be something . . .”

“If there is no helping the Emperor,” I said, quietly as I could, “there is no helping anyone.”

“He at least may rest in some peace,” said Kaim-Olorin.

“His doctor is not even certain he *can* be revived,” I said, and felt the light of the sun grow a little colder, “but if he is . . . it may be for the last time.”

What could he say to that? What could anyone?

“He is a good man,” said Prince Kaim. “It will be a different galaxy when he is gone.”

Below us, a cluster of schoolchildren was being escorted toward the Jaddian ships by a pair of women in black gowns. Chantry women, priestesses of the lowest order. I suppressed the urge to curl my lips, had to remind myself that such women had nothing to do with the Choir, with Douro and Kedron and Tarquin, with the demon called Ship.

Beneath my mask, I smiled, tasted bitterness on my tongue. “One thing I have learned in my time, my friend,” I said, still holding the auctor’s cloak in one fist. “There are no good governments. Only good men, and William was one of the very best.”

Was.

It was only after I had said it that I understood what I had said, that I had spoken as of one already dead.

“It *will* be a different galaxy,” I said with conviction. “A different *empire*. But, I pray, one free of the Cielcin.”

“You really think you can stop them here?” Olorin asked.

I looked at him. “Still you doubt?”

“That you can stop the Pale? *Non*,” Olorin said. “But these . . . *gods* of theirs?”

I watched the last of the Chantry schoolchildren—orphans, I guessed—as they were chivvied up the ramp, followed by a large, extended family, their faces gaunt, their eyes wide and distant.

“I died, Olorin,” I said at length, conscious of Cassandra at my side. “Twice now, and nearly three times. I have to believe that means *something*.” I paused, turned to look at the other man. “What, then? If not the hope of victory?”

The prince did not answer at once, stood with arms crossed, his mirrored eyes surveying the throng beneath us. The containment team was escorting another pair of floating pods out across the tarmac toward the lazar camp. I saw a hand pressed against a porthole at the side of the container.

It was very small.

Victory.

“I told you once that God does not need your belief. Do you remember?” Olorin asked.

“I do,” I said.

“It is good that you believe.”

I opened my mouth to challenge him, but a shout from below interrupted me.

“That’s my wife!” The man’s ragged voice was like a shot. “My wife! My son!”

Two legionnaires struggled to hold a man back. He strained against them, tried to clear the space between him and the line for the neighboring ship.

I could not hear the soldiers’ reply, guessed from the way the man nearest raised his stunner that he threatened the fellow with his stunner.

“You’re all going to the same place!” said a triaster in white and red, his voice amplified by his armor. “The same ship! Up there!” He pointed up at the sky. “Now get in line!”

The man struggled against his captors. He was not a big man—the plebeians seldom are—but he was big enough, strong enough to pose trouble for the soldiers. I could sense the shot that was sure to come. The legionnaires would have to let the man go before their compatriot could fire, in which time there would be a split second in which the fellow could act.

I had to act faster, and twisting a dial on the inside of my left gauntlet,

amplified my voice high as it would go.

“Hold!” My voice had become the thunder, and fell over the landing field, rebounded off the rocks that held Catraeth and from the very ramparts of Fort Din itself.

Every man froze.

I stepped lightly from the platform, landed with nary a bending of the legs. Cassandra followed, and Sir Aulus and a trio of lesser Knights Excubitor. The men before me retreated like the tide, heads drooping, bodies bending at the waist.

The fellow looked at me, muddy eyes wide, nostrils stretched.

He’s afraid, I thought. *He’s afraid of me*. And of more than me. His young wife, willowy but short, her flaxen hair falling almost to her waist, stood with their son—a boy no older than three—half buried in her skirts.

“What is this, soldier?” I asked.

“Kneel, you dogs!” said the triaster, brandishing his stunner. “You know who this is? This is the Emperor’s Shadow! On your knees!”

The peasants in the queue all knelt, even as I raised a hand to forestall the order. Only the restrained man stayed standing, his captors not daring to loose him. “My lord!” he said, eyes on the woman and the boy. “My wife! My boy! They want me on a different ship!”

I turned my upraised hand on him, and one of the soldiers took this as license to wallop the man in his belly.

His woman gasped. “Lonan!”

“I said *hold*, soldier!” I let my hand fall. “I asked you what this is.”

“He tried to take Vipin’s gun, my lord!” said the triaster. “He doesn’t understand they’re all bound for the same boat!”

“They split us up!” said the man called Lonan. “My wife and boy and me!”

I understood. The tags stamped on the wrists of the little family in front of me had ordained them for separate ships—though those landers both were meant for the same Jaddian supercarrier in orbit above.

“They’re going to the same place?” I asked.

“Both for *Shabrang*, aye, lord,” said the triaster.

“Peace!” I said. Looking at the peasant man, I asked, “Your name is Lonan?”

“It is, lord.”

“Lonan,” I said, “had I not been here, these men *would* have taken your family from you for causing them trouble.” I looked to the triaster, to the other legionnaires. “But you are all bound for the same ship in orbit. You would have found one another again. You understand?”

The man’s eyes were wild, and fear—I think—stole his tongue. He swallowed. Nodded.

Rounding on the triaster, I said, “Let them go together.”

“My lord?” A soldier cocked his head.

“Together, I said!” I thrust a finger in the direction of the woman and boy. “Have we one traveling alone?”

“I, lord!” said another young man, dark of hair and eye.

I thrust a finger at the man in question. “You then! You will take this man’s place! Lonan, you will go with your people, and you will cause no more trouble! Am I clear?”

There were tears in the peasant man’s eyes. “Thank you!” he said, and blinked them back. “Thank you, lord!”

“You were this close,” I said, and held thumb and forefinger out less than an inch apart. Rounding on the triaster, I asked, “Who has the command here?”

“Nerses, lord, he’s our legate.”

“Tell Legate Nerses that no families are to be split up. If any gives you trouble, stun them, but do not deny them passage. I’ll have no orphans or widows made this day!”

The triaster at last dropped his gun, and the men that held Lonan freed him. Lonan hurried past to embrace his wife and child.

Cassandra was looking at me, her face hidden behind her helm’s blank visor, stark white. The sleeve of her *mandyas* fluttered as she stood, hip cocked, one hand on the pommel of her sword.

Her mother and I had boarded separate ships, once.

CHAPTER 52

BY SLOW DECAY

THE FIRST YEAR PASSED away, and the second faded—and all the while, there was no sign of the Cielcin fleet. With every day that passed, Gododdin was emptied, though every day more and more people arrived from the hinterlands, from the lesser cities and farming hamlets that covered the planet's surface, so that the city seemed to swell, as though it were afflicted by the plague itself, and the camps grew like tumors from the body of a once healthy civilization.

Every day there were murders.

Every day there were rapes.

Every day Amon Kosis and his Martians were forced to execute the offenders.

And no sign of the Cielcin came.

Not for the first time in my long life, I found myself contemplating the tyrant, Damocles, who—expressing a desire for his master's throne—was granted kingship for a time, on the condition that a sword be hung unsheathed above his head, tied up by a single horsehair, forever poised to fall.

“They should be here . . .”

The whispers began.

“. . . said they weren't far behind.”

“A great fleet, he said!”

“The greatest fleet!”

“Where are they?”

“Where is the Emperor?”

“He lied. Marlowe lied.”

“—wants the throne, they say. The princess—”

“He has the princess, I heard. Has had her, and had her, and had her . . .”

Every day the noose tightened, every day the hair that held the sword splintered. Just a little more. Well I discerned the Chantry’s voice in every whisper, felt the Chantry’s hand in every twist of the knife. Though I had pulled Tarquin’s fangs from his head on the day of my arrival, Leviathan had claws as well as teeth.

And more than just one head.

• • •

“They should be here,” I said, watching a pair of the *uthras* at their work, clambering over the outer shell of the machine core.

Looking at it, the structure—that great sphere suspended in the center of that greater emptiness at *Demiurge*’s heart—reminded me of nothing so much as the shrine to Miudanar’s skull.

“If they left just behind us, they should have arrived by now.” I gripped the black iron rail, peered down to where a trio of lesser *uthras* scuttled crablike along a spar. “Where are they, do you think?”

The footfalls of the beast at my back came unevenly.

Step. Drag . . . Step.

“I cannot say,” said the owner of those feet, voice dim as thunder.

And bright as starlight, it repeated itself, “We cannot say.”

“Perhaps they were delayed.”

I did not turn to look its way. The beast was very close, and stank of animal musk and unwashed hair.

“There has been nothing—”

“—no sign—”

“—on the telegraph to suggest their current location?”

I felt as though my flesh had turned to stone. “Not since Danu,” I said. “Dorayaica must know that they’ve been compromised.”

“Or they are in transit,” said Orphan.

“In transit to *where*?” I asked.

One of the *uthras* had reached the outer hull of the machine core, had begun to claw its steady way up the smooth surface of the steel.

"They should be here, Orphan," I said after a long silence. "Why aren't they here?"

A massive hand—its pale flesh mottled and gnarled—closed about the railing at my right. It was the creature's left. The other left followed; each long finger ringed with the spoils of Vorgossos—its birthright. When it did not speak at once, I turned, peered up into the monster's shadowed faces. Orphan had raised the deep hood of its black robe, so that its heads were veiled in a shadow deeper than *Demiurge*'s omnipresent gloom.

"Perhaps . . ." said the one.

"Perhaps they were delayed." The other finished lightly.

"Delayed?" I asked.

The creature answered in its castrato, saying, "I know nothing, master."

"Nothing," said the other, "save that they are not *here*."

Unable to bear the beast's examination any longer, I looked away, looked down to where a swarm of crawling hands moved like so many rats across the floor far, far below.

Orphan made a coughing, choking sound—deep in one of its throats. It must have been the basso, for the castrato spoke simultaneously, saying, "It may be only that they seek to regroup before the assault."

"That could take years," the basso said, still gasping.

"We may yet have years," the higher voice agreed.

I stood gripping the rail, knuckles white in the low light, the tendons in the backs of my hands creaking with strain. I could not escape the crawling sense that there was something *more* afoot. Something worse.

"This is Dorayaica," I finally said. "You don't know Dorayaica."

I could feel Orphan's four eyes on me, and turning, found the devil peering down at me. The pale eyes of the castrati shone from the depths of its hood. "I do," it said.

"We do," said the other face. "We know what our mother knew, and she knew *it*."

"It came to Vorgossos," the other said. "Dorayaica came. Long ago."

Of course. The Prince of Princes had constructed Kharn Sagara's world engines, made Vorgossos into an imitation of Dharan-Tun, cast the Undying's home in the image of that city of demons.

"Mother was the first," it said.

"The first. The first to break their speech. The first to speak to them."

I imagined that other world, that world in darkness. The world of the Extras, of Vorgossos and MINOS and the rest. It had been *they* who first contacted the Cielcin. I could picture it so clearly: the young Dorayaica standing before the throne of the Undying, surrounded by its fingers—its concubines and protectors—their flesh as yet not steel.

"It is from us that your kind derived the means to understand their speech," Orphan said.

"It is from my mother."

"My mother!"

I narrowed my eyes. I knew as much as any man alive about mankind's history with the Cielcin language. I knew the names of the scholiasts and lay interpreters who had worked with Cielcin prisoners on Echidna, after Powers's victory at Cressgard, to divine the first fundamentals of their speech. Their achievement had been among the greatest in human history. To diminish that, to claim it was a lie . . .

. . . but was it?

Even if the Orphan was wrong, and the Empire had not merely inherited knowledge of the Cielcin language from Vorgossos . . . might not the Chantry have employed a daimon of their own making? Might there be more to the tale than I had dared to suspect?

Did it matter?

"You don't know Dorayaica," I said again, shaking my head. "Not like I do."

Was that a smile on the creature's right face?

"Perhaps," it said.

"Perhaps not."

Orphan turned, left hands both upon the rail, and limped toward the

open arch to the heart and brain of its ship—my ship. Its shoulders bunched as it made its lurching way forward, limping with every odd step.

Step. Drag . . . Step. Drag . . .

“Dorayaica is cunning, more cunning than any of the other princes,” I said. “I have a bad feeling about all this.”

One of Orphan’s twin heads peered back over its rounded shoulder. “What do you fear?”

“Some other plot?”

I could only shake my head. “If the fleet were massing elsewhere, we would see them on the telegraph.”

“Unless they have disabled the telegraph,” said Orphan.

And Orphan said, “Unless they have destroyed it—”

“—discovered Sagara’s deception.”

“They know we’re *here*. They must. Dorayaica is one of *them* now. If it could cross the void to face me back on Danu, it might come to Gododdin whenever it wished. It might have come here a hundred times for all we know. If it has, it knows our strength, our weaknesses . . . everything.”

We had reached the interior of the daimon core by then, stood beneath the living curtains of brain matter. “If they are traveling at warp . . .” The centimanus traced one bent finger along the hanging membrane, following the passage of a vein.

“Then even the Watchers cannot see us, yes,” I snapped. “I know.”

The Watchers would be cut off from the greater cosmos so long as the Cielcin fleet was at warp.

“Assuming, of course—”

“—that the Watchers are *with* the Cielcin fleet.”

Orphan let its hand fall, hiked up the hem of its robe as one of the *uthras* scuttled by. “The damage is repaired,” it said, voice high and breathless. “But the wounds we sustained will never really heal.”

“What’s the difference?” I asked, not following, and momentarily glad of the change of subject.

“There were memories . . .” Orphan peered upward, twin faces illuminated in that moment by the glow of the lamps above. It reached out

with its strong right arm, brushed the nearest curtain—resembling a vintner proud of and concerned for his vines. “Thoughts which can never be regained. You think of this ship as a machine—”

“—and it is!” the deep voice interjected, prompting the other to look at the other head, reproachful.

“But it is *more*. It is *alive*, and living things do not heal straight.”

“There is . . . scarring,” the black-haired face explained, peering at me with eyes dark as the night without a star. “And loss.”

“Data loss.”

Orphan approached the center console, looked up to admire the hellish curtains that formed the pseudo-consciousness that made up the core of the ship’s computer. “Flesh heals,” it said. “Machines must be repaired. But what is lost in the machine may oft be recovered, while what is lost to the flesh . . .”

“What did we lose?” I asked.

The giant’s white-haired face turned to look at its companion. “He asks after what was lost.”

“I heard him,” said that other. “Too much.”

“How much?” I asked.

“You cannot imagine . . .” Orphan once again reached out and stroked the nearest curtain, as though it were the flank of some well-loved beast. “Fort Grissom was the last remnant of the American Dominion. The very last. The wealth—”

“—the true wealth—”

“—of Vorgossos was not what you see, Father.” With one left hand, Orphan plucked one of the thousand necklaces it wore, a heavy band of gold. “Not gold. Not blood. Not Sagara’s *collections*. Not even the gift of life eternal . . .” Eyes pale as stars gazed at me from beneath the gold-embroidered hood. “It is data.”

“Knowledge.”

Knowledge.

I tried to picture it. To imagine the oceans of knowledge there must have been in the memory of Vorgossos. In Brethren, who was Cheyenne and

Daniel both, and all the poor fools that had been grafted onto them, like the branches of some hybridic tree.

“There were backups?” I asked. “Here on the ship?”

“Yes,” Orphan said, still caressing the pulsing, luminous membrane that made up a part of the behemoth’s mind. “Now what was lost—”

“—if it remains anywhere—”

“—resides in me.”

“In me.”

Was that a smile on the white-haired face? “I talk to it, sometimes. When I can.”

“When we can.”

The castrato allowed this correction with the barest nod, continued speaking, “I try and help it . . . remember.”

“Help it remember?” I looked sidelong at the sheets of hanging neural tissue contained under the thinnest, palest skin. I fancied I could feel the beat of some huge, distant heart, a machine buried deep in the heart of the machine core.

I drew my hand away.

“Some of what was lost may be regained,” Orphan said. “In time.” It ran gnarled, beringed fingers over the surface again, ridged nails scratching gently at the living machine’s surface. They were kin. Scions of Brethren, of Cheyenne and Columbia both, both shoots of the tree Felsenburgh had planted, grafted onto human stock.

“But you remember everything,” I said. “All of it? Everything it knew . . . before?”

“Me?” Orphan shook one head.

“Us?” It shook the other. “Bless us, no. No, Father. No.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said, sharply, coldly. “I’m not your father.”

Undaunted, Orphan raised its three hands like claws, asked, “Do you know how many square cubits of neural membrane there are in this machine?”

“More than forty thousand,” the kingly face replied. “We have only six.” It displayed the requisite number of fingers on the one right hand.

“No man can know *everything*, Father,” said the castrato. “Not even we.”

“I said *don’t* call me that!” I said, more strongly than before. “I am not your father, do you understand?”

Orphan blinked—first one face, then the other. “Mother made me—”

“—us—”

“—for you.”

“—to serve.”

“What is a father, but the cause of creation?” Orphan asked. “Your will—your actions—brought me into being . . .”

“. . . as surely as your seed brought forth the girl. We are alike in this—she and I—and in other ways.”

“Both our mothers are dead—”

“That’s enough!” I said.

Orphan turned its faces from me. “Forgive me . . .” it said, deep voice suddenly soft. “I know I am—”

“—we are . . .”

I raised a hand, almost touched one twisted shoulder. I withdrew it without making the connection. “I’m sorry.”

“We did not ask to be made.” The black-haired head turned to look at me, eyes hard and hurt. “To serve—”

“But we will serve,” said the other.

“Must serve.” The creature’s huge right hand, six-fingered, slipped out from beneath the black-and-gold brocade, clutched the embroidered edge of the garment. “But we do not know everything.”

I drew my own cloak about myself, aware at once of the bitter cold. Could the machine feel it?

“You know more than I know,” I said at last. “You have your mother’s memories. Her . . . *knowledge*. You must have some insight.”

This was why I had left Gododdin and made the journey back to *Demiurge*—a two-day voyage complicated by three separate decontamination checks. So that I might have this conversation unwatched, unlistened-to by the triumvirs and their spies.

Above the whispers, beyond the reach of the serpent's coils.

"Insight?" Orphan asked. "Perhaps . . ."

I could sense its dejection, and understood that I had wounded the creature mightily in rejecting its claim of kinship. Somewhere in my mind's seeming-infinite recesses, I felt the coils of the serpent wind a bit tighter. Leviathan had me, even there.

I had made him, too. A part of him at least. As I had made the monster before me.

You think I like having him around?

"I am sorry, Orphan," I said, drawing the beast's four eyes. "Forgive me."

One face turned to regard the other as some unheard conference passed from one lobe of its great mind to the other. Presently the white head bowed. The black lifted its chin.

"You do not need my forgiveness," the deep one said, adjusting the set of its crown with that six-fingered hand. "You are my maker—"

"—our maker."

"All I have I owe to you."

"How can we begrudge you?" the pale-eyed face inquired. "Even your cruelties?"

"Father." The black-haired head wielded the word like a needle.

I shut my eyes, and so erased that room entire. "If you know Dorayaica," I said, "tell me: What will it do?"

Orphan had been cast in the image of its mother, a machine made in man's image, but a machine all the same, one capable of calculations—of patterns of thought well beyond those of any ordinary man, beyond even the greatest scholiast. The centimanus was a living computer, just like the brain of the ship in which we stood.

"It will attack elsewhere," the black king said.

The white agreed. "Where it will strike, we cannot say. But it will not strike here."

"Forum?" I asked. "Avalon? Earth?" Those were the principal targets.

"Each is possible," Orphan said.

“All are possible.”

I opened my eyes. The simple fact that Dorayaica might attack more than one of these critical targets had not occurred to me.

“It knows we are here,” the pilot said. “You gave it this place . . .”

“ . . . if it had been among us. If it knows our strength . . .”

“Then it knows how thinly spread our forces have become.”

“It will strike where it will.”

“It will dare us to answer it.” The eyes of the white-haired face rolled into the back of its head. Its left hands started to shake, and the other head—the one crowned in rude gold—turned to face its other half, concern on that pallid, twisted face.

I stood silent by, hardly daring to move. Something had changed in the creature. Its posture stiffened. The black-haired head still twisted to regard its counterpart, whose eyes remained turned inward, whose face spasmed. Orphan had indicated that it possessed the barest glimmering of its mother’s *sight*. The beast, Brethren, had possessed something like my own ability to perceive the gray expanse of time.

It was prophecy the creature spoke. A vision.

“It will taunt you. Torment you. It will goad the others,” the white face whispered. “The soldiers. The priests. The prince . . .” Both left hands seized the hem of the heavy black robe and shook. “The prince . . . the prince . . . he will seek to muster a reply. You *must not let him*.” The right hand shot out, seized me by the wrist. Pale eyes—the color of water—focused on me then. Whatever oracle had gripped the living machine was passing. “You must not take the bait. Whatever the challenge. Whatever the cost. You must wait. Wait! Wait!”

The eyes darted, flickered from my face to something only they could see.

“You must not despair,” Orphan said. “It was despair that nearly killed your daughter. It is despair alone he cannot forgive. Despair alone puts you beyond his reach. Say you understand.”

“He understands!” said the black-haired king.

“I understand,” I said, but I didn’t see what it mattered. Not then.

“They will burn *everything*,” Orphan said. “And you will do nothing. You must do nothing. They *must* come here. There must be light! There will be light! Let there be light! Light! Light!”

Light.

“I understand!”

Orphan’s grip relaxed.

I stepped back, watched as the brittle quality that had possessed the creature dissipated, and it became only *itself* again. Four eyes peered down at me.

“I understand.”

I was still on the path.

I had only to stay the course.

Come what may.

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CHAPTER 53

THE TRIUMVIRS

“MY LORDS, WE ARE running out of food,” said Tor Xanthippus.

Amon Kosis rubbed his eyes. “We sent men to man those farms.”

“Soldiers,” Xanthippus agreed. “Not farmers.”

“Nearly all of them had experience—”

“On their own worlds,” said Xanthippus, dark eyes more darkly hooded in his seamed old face. “There’s simply no replacing the native farmers. They know the planet better. The soil ecology . . . and there’s the plague to contend with.”

My reflection peered back at me out of the holography suite in the ceiling. I watched the others reflected there. Priests and princes, strategoi and scholiasts. Still the space seemed almost empty. Most of the council had retreated to their ships already.

“There are reports of riots in Bannog and Riata,” said Prince Matthias. “Depots broken into. Distribution centers ransacked.”

The men of Gododdin had nigh all been reduced to begging.

“It’s a miracle we’ve had such little violence here,” said one of the Martian captains. Tal or Tarn or Tars.

“It’s no miracle,” said the Prince Regent, drawing my eye. Alexander was seated in the throne as ever, seeming petulant, almost bored.

I could hardly fault him, who myself had been staring up into the ceiling a moment before. A sense of futility hung over the proceedings like smoke, the sense that we were on a ship becalmed.

“It’s fear.” Alexander cracked his knuckles as he spoke, one by one, working his way along each finger. “The greatest part of our force on the surface is here, in Catraeth. They would not dare here what they dared in Bannog and the rest.”

It was also true that Catraeth was better supplied and better able to feed its people than the other cities, being the capital and the city closest to the stars.

“We could bring rations in from out-system,” said Strategos Koparkar, moving a display window in the table before him. “Perhaps the Consortium —”

“They may not get here in time,” said Amata Rempel.

“What’s the point?” said Prince Matthias. “The slums are overrun by plague. There’s hardly anyone left worth saving . . .”

A brittle silence fell upon the proceedings then, neither the first nor the last.

A rapping sound broke that silence. The noise of a single fingernail tapping the black glass of the tabletop. “That is not a worthy thought, my prince,” said Lord Tarquin. “There are as yet more than two billion people on this planet.”

Matthias averted his eyes.

I studied Tarquin, surprised at him. The Prince-Prior wore no armor, but a black clerical uniform, double-breasted cassock buttoned up either side of his broad chest. The tails of the blindfold that hid his eyes hung over one shoulder, their inner side embroidered with hieroglyphs.

I felt Cassandra tense beside me at the sound of his voice.

“Perhaps we might bring food from the fleet back down?” Tarquin said.

The suggestion was met with almost a kind of static. It had been the dance of many months balancing the need to offload refugees for their outbound flights with the need to supply the fleet. The thought of reversing that process—though it should prove much simpler—was like an ulcer in every stomach.

“My men need that food,” said Amon Kosis, drawing a murmur of assent from the strategoi.

“Perhaps,” Lord Tarquin said, undaunted, “we need fewer men.”

“The plague will solve that problem for us,” said Prince Matthias darkly.

Tarquin looked long and hard at the older prince. Matthias stared down at the space between his hands. “Honored lords,” the Chantry man began,

“we have been at high alert now for many years. The Cielcin have not come, despite Lord Marlowe’s prophesying.” He thrust a hand, palm up, in my direction. “Our ships are overmanned. Perhaps it is time we return some of them to fugue.”

To my surprise, Prince Alexander blinked, looked down at the warrior-priest. “We need those men.”

“With respect, Prince Regent, we do not,” said Lord Tarquin. “We need our ships, and they may be crewed with a far smaller complement of men than are currently out of the ice.”

“But if the Cielcin arrive—”

“If,” Tarquin said, echoing the Spartans of old. “If the Cielcin arrive, it will be in numbers unlike anything we have faced in prior engagements. Against one or two of their worldships, we might attempt a land invasion. But against a hundred? Against a thousand?”

“Lord Tarquin is right,” I said. “Against a fleet of this magnitude, bombardment is our best course. Infiltration and sabotage simply take too long, and even if we were to cripple their ships in orbit, we would still have to contend with each worldship’s fleet of lesser vessels . . .” I looked at Cassandra, who looked ready to be ill at the thought of another battle.

“What do you propose, Lord Shadow?” asked Amon Kosis, of the triumvirs the one most friendly to me.

Lord Shadow. I had to remind myself that arcane style was my own. “William would prioritize the care of his people,” I said, invoking the name of Caesar to quieten dissent. “We should do as Lord Tarquin suggests. If by reducing the number of active service in orbit we might save the lives of any of the people on the surface—surely we have a duty to do so.”

The warrior-priest inclined his head.

Did the fellow truly care for the well-being of the people? Or was there some other machination at work? I thought of all the ways this turn might be turned against me, found none.

“We ought to abandon the system entirely,” said Strategos Koparkar. “With the frontier fallen—”

“No!” I said, too loudly, too swiftly. “We must hold our position. The

Cielcin will come.”

“You don’t know that,” said Prince Alexander, not unfairly. “The Cielcin know our location. They may know our strength—they are bound to have spies here. They may choose to pass us by.”

“They may have already passed us by!” said Tor Xanthippus.

“We *ought*,” Koparkar began again, visibly irritated, “to abandon this system entirely. With the frontier fallen, Gododdin has lost all prior strategic significance!”

“Gododdin is a necessary stepping-stone for ships crossing the gulf!” said Captain Watts, sitting on the upper level of the conference chamber.

“For human ships!” said Koparkar. “The Cielcin have demonstrated their capacity to penetrate the core systems time and again.”

Amon Kosis was nodding. “And with the lion’s share of the armada here, what remains is spread too thinly—save at Forum—to mount any real sort of defense.”

“The princes of the great houses,” said Matthias, “might muster adequate defenses on their own.”

“Precisely!” I said, recapturing my chance. “We are all *here*, my lords. We will never again gather such a force as we have here. It took Caesar *decades*!”

“And the Cielcin know that!” said Strategos Koparkar, thrusting a finger in my direction. “Thanks to *you*! It’s thanks to you, *Lord Shadow*, that the Cielcin will pass us by. They know coming here is a trap!”

A rushing hiss escaped me, and I turned my head away, found Cassandra staring at me.

“It is a trap the Cielcin will take,” she said.

“You don’t know that, girl,” said the strategos. “Neither of you *know* anything. You’re hoping. Praying. Guessing.”

Cassandra stiffened, sharpened her chin. “I’ve fought them.”

“So have I, girl,” said he, raising his hands, “so have we all.”

“The Watchers?” Cassandra arched one eyebrow, every atom her mother’s child then. “When, exactly?”

Leonid Bartosz—uncharacteristically silent for most of that afternoon—

spoke from his place at Koparkar's left, his sharp but watery eyes alight. "Marlowe, control your bastard."

I felt her tense, prepare to rise.

I threw a hand out to forestall her. "Have a care, Sir Leonid. My daughter remains a Swordmaster of Jadd."

"Enough of this wrangling!" said Prince Alexander, looking to Tarquin for support. "Marlowe, your daughter sits on this council at your behest, but she has no rank, no right to challenge my strategoi."

I stood. "My lords, we waste time," I said. "There are two billion starving people here. We will not abandon them. Our efforts to evacuate the populace have slowed—they were never fast enough. And the plague is well beyond our control." I marked the telltale iodine stains beneath every nose. "But Lord . . . Tarquin . . ." I hesitated. ". . . speaks wisdom. We must *do* something. What is more, we must be *seen* to be doing something."

Alexander was watching me as I spoke, chin propped on hands clasped before him, eyes unreadable. Meeting those eyes, I said, "Fear will only hold the people in line so long, *my prince*. They need hope."

The prince compressed his lips, offered the barest, thinnest smile—his mother's son, then. "Bread isn't hope, my lord."

"Bread is better than hope," I said.

"For a day, perhaps," said Alexander. "But when the bread runs out?"

"That is a problem for tomorrow," I said, wishing I could—like Edouard's god-man—multiply the grain supply.

Amon Kosis rapped the table with his knuckles to draw attention. "The situation here is still untenable," he said. "We can reduce our numbers all we like, but food is finite. Ship hydroponics can never produce food at scale, and if the surface farms have failed . . . our time in this system is limited."

I shut my eyes, the words of Orphan's prophecy resounding in my ears:

You must not take the bait.

You must not despair.

"We must hold," I said. "So long as the Emperor is here"—I did not say *So long as I am here*—"the Cielcin will come."

“When?” asked the Martian legate.

“If I knew that . . .” I shook my head.

“What of His Radiance?” asked Amata Rempel. She had removed her white officer’s cap, revealing black hair pulled tightly back. “The Emperor should be consulted.”

“My father is in no state . . .” said Prince Alexander.

“This whole system is one big nuclear reactor,” said Amon Kosis. “Meltdown’s only a matter of time.”

I felt each pair of eyes fall on me. At once the auctor’s cloak—black above, white beneath—weighed heavily on me, as though it were lined with lead.

“The sun is high,” I said at last, *my sun*, “and the Emperor is far away.”

It was an old Mandari proverb, taken by some as license, as if the Emperor’s remoteness were justification for breaking his laws. But that was not the original meaning. It was a lament, an expression of sorrow, of regret that the Emperor was too far off to aid the common man from whatever injustice had fallen on him.

Never had our Emperor been so far away.

In his place sat the triumvirs: Alexander. Amon. Tarquin.

And me.

“We need that food,” I said, looking to Tarquin. To Kosis. “How quickly can the men be put under the ice?”

“Across the entire fleet?” Kosis looked to the strategoi. “Two weeks? A month?”

“See it done,” I said, and felt a pang. Fixing my eye on Alexander, I said, “You should oversee the distribution of the grain, my prince.”

“Me?” the prince recoiled. “Why me?”

“It is your Empire,” I said. “The people should have their care from you.”

Alexander held my gaze a moment.

Let him say I want his throne now, I thought, but kept the bitter smile from my face.

“They do not love me,” he said.

“Then teach them to love you.”

Alexander stood. “I am not your student, Marlowe,” he said, snatching up his helm.

The light in his eyes was fire, not sunlight.

I let my shoulders slump. “Very well.”

Did he want me to do it? I retook my seat. Did he want the people to thank me for their salvation? I had a sudden image of an idol, the icon of some divinity hoisted higher and higher as its worshippers built for it a pedestal. One too narrow and too tall.

The idol fell, and shattered.

I felt a serpent coil past my feet, crossed my legs beneath the table.

There *was* another way.

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CHAPTER 54

THE MOB RULES

“THAT WENT WELL,” SELENE said, permitting me to help her up into the armored vehicle. She halted in the doorway, looked back out the way we had come, over the plaza with its statue of Mother Earth to where the crowd still stood, held back by a triple line of men in legionary white.

She wore an environment suit of Imperial white, closefitting, chased with gold. Her helmet’s visor was of metal clear as glass that bared her lovely face. Paint green as her eyes shaded her lids, and cosmetics hid the mark of iodine at nose and tear ducts. But she smiled, and her smile was like the sun whose image decorated her jeweled breast.

“I think so,” I said, tearing my gaze from her royal profile.

To her, their hunger was only hunger—naked and clean. To me, it was only one symptom, the sign of a deeper ill and hurt in the heart and blood of every man and woman on Gododdin. They knew they were doomed. Whatever help was coming had come—they knew it in their bones. Pestilence would take them. Or Famine. Or War. They all knew it. Knew that Death would come.

The princess’s charity was only balm, a cruel mercy, a few drops of rain in the desert.

No more.

They were wrong, of course. There were yet many—many thousand—who would escape that black planet, but it would not be enough. For the rest . . . for the rest . . .

Selene had made her speech, offered her prayers, her sacrifices to Holy Mother Earth. There had been lanterns lit, and obeisances made to the princess and to the naked statue of the goddess that towered over all. Then priors—common priests, true believers unlike Yod and Tarquin—went out

among the people with ration bars and loaves of bread and distributed them under the watchful eye of hoplites.

Then the queues began. Men and women—some clutching their unwashed children, some skull-like and alone—waited for hours to receive their rations from black plastic crates.

“If the farmers had stayed . . .” Cassandra had said to me, watching the priests and soldiers at their work, “things wouldn’t be like this. They could have fed themselves.”

“Fear is a poison, girl,” I said. “It makes men animals again.”

And man is a herd animal. A pack animal.

Predator and prey.

“You should come inside,” I said, daring to touch her arm.

Selene looked round. “Yes.” She smiled sadly. “Will it help, do you think?”

Alexander’s words washed out over my tongue. “For a day.”

Cassandra was right. The man who abandoned the means to feed himself was slow to regain them—if he ever did. “They’ll be back tomorrow,” I said, “and in greater numbers.” The Legions had long ago opened the storehouses the governor-general and castellan of Fort Din had stocked and maintained for decades and more. Those were running dry.

“How long can we keep it up?” she asked, stepping into the dim compartment.

“A few months,” I said. “Half a year, maybe.”

It had taken weeks for the fleet to pivot, to begin returning its legionnaires and hoplites to the freeze, thus freeing up their rations for the poor people of Gododdin.

Sir Verus entered last of all, shining and silent. He saluted me without a word, and passed within.

“Abba.” Cassandra’s voice floated from just behind, amplified by her suit. “We’re ready to go.”

I had frozen in the archway, stood watching the crowd. The herd. *How quickly we debase ourselves*, I thought, recalling my own debasement, sucking water from the puddles in my cell in Dharan-Tun, desperate to

survive. These people were no different. No better. No worse. Well I recall their dirty faces. Their hollow, glassy eyes—the light in each distant and fevered. A mother with three little girls before her. A pair of young men otherwise alone. How many would be dead of plague within the month? Of starvation within the year?

Of fire . . . when fire came?

Am I a good man?

Sir Aulus and his Excubitors were still on the ground outside. Their place was *on* the vehicle, on the running boards at either side, swords in hand. I gave the silent captain a signal, and he moved to obey.

Then I shut the door. Selene and Cassandra sat side by side, facing forward, while Sir Verus had taken the rear-facing place opposite his charge. We were all of us armored, suited to keep off the plague. I drew my black cloak about myself, sat beside Sir Verus. I could hear the noise of the Excubitors outside, clinging to the hull like scarabs.

How I longed to remove my mask, to run my hands over my face. I settled for resting my helmeted head against the cushioned headrest.

“So many people . . .” Selene’s voice seemed far away. “I wish there was more we could do . . .”

Cassandra shifted in her seat. “You mustn’t be so hard on yourself, princess,” she said. “We’re doing all we can.”

Selene—the only person in the compartment whose face was visible behind her visor—licked her lips. Her eyes were shining. “There was a baby—did you see? Right there at the end? A little boy, I think. He had the virus. The mother, she tried to hide it, but . . .” She inhaled sharply. “The attack we’re waiting for . . . it’s already here. All the Cielcin have to do is wait.” One gloved hand gripped the other, and she stared down at them, her eyes hidden by those painted lids. “That poor little boy, he . . . he can’t even walk and he’s . . .”

“. . . already dead.”

Selene shut her eyes. “He’s not the only one.”

“No,” I said.

“I thought you had a plan,” said she, eyes flashing.

I clenched my jaw. “It doesn’t matter,” I said, “the enemy isn’t here.”

“But *you* are,” the princess said. “You *died*, Hadrian. I was there. He—your god, I mean—he brought you back.”

“It’s best not to talk about these things,” I said, voice flat as I could make it.

“Why not?” she snapped, her bright eyes cutting a swath across my soul.

“You know the answer to that.”

“What are you afraid of?” The princess drew herself back, sat as straight any fighter. “You’ll just come back.”

“But you won’t,” I said, and drawing my masked face from Selene’s face to Cassandra’s, added, “neither of you.”

“Abba . . .”

We had started moving, were leaving the plaza and its unwashed masses behind, the priests and soldiers still working to distribute rations. I could see the rest of our convoy following. Long-bodied, six-wheeled vehicles like our own. As we left the plaza and angled out onto a side street, I saw the artillery that escorted us, Chafer-class colossi like four-legged beetles, each just large enough to hold its three-man squad. The Chafers slid along, relying on the wheels in each of the colossi’s feet.

“It’s best not to tempt Fate,” I said.

The whole of the city—and much of the camps, the city beneath the city—had shown up for the princess’s donation. They waved banners, shook placards, hoisted holy icons on poles. I saw countless portraits of the Emperor raised on staffs, and holographs of him or his holy ancestor. Men and women made the sign of the sun disc as we passed, or bowed their heads, or cheered.

“Earth!” The muffled cry resounded, a dull thunder through the thick armor and glass of the carriage hull. “Earth! Earth and Emperor! Earth!”

These mingled with other cries, cries I pretended not to hear.

“Murderers!”

“Killers!”

I peered out at the faces of the onlookers—the protestors. Ordinarily,

such persons were never seen, were not permitted their freedom. But there were simply too many of them.

There were placards—intermixed with the icons of royalty, the white banners with their red suns. Some were pleas: *DELIVER US!* and *SAVE US!* appeared over and over again. But there were others.

WE ARE DYING, read one tattered sign, held aloft by a man with a malformed face.

WHERE IS THE EMPEROR’S MERCY?

WE HAVE NO FOOD.

But there was one sign I remember now most clearly, written rudely in black on water-stained cardboard.

YOU BROUGHT US HERE TO DIE.

The man who held that placard wore a helmet to hide his face, dressed in a black jumpsuit that seemed legionary surplus. He did not wave it, or stamp, or shout, only stood pressed against the barricade, sign thrust out where we all could see it.

“Halfmortal! Halfmortal!” These fresh cries shook me from my reverie. “The Chosen! Chosen One! One Reborn!”

Shoals of humanity pressed on either side, held back from the road by rows of iron palings. I could feel Cassandra’s eyes on me, felt her fear and concern.

“Don’t they know we’re doing all we can?” Selene asked.

“I think most of them do,” said Cassandra.

“It just isn’t enough,” I said.

Something pelted the groundcar. A rock, or a bottle—I never knew. Outside we passed a sea of angry faces.

I could see the horror, the sadness and the shame in Princess Selene’s face, and reached for the controls, to polarize the windows.

“No!” she said, reaching for me. “Don’t.”

The men and women outside could not see us, could not be certain which of the cars we were in. “You don’t have to see any of this,” I said, not taking my hand from the controls.

“Yes,” she said, “I do.”

I drew my hand away.

“We should have flown,” Cassandra said.

“Too many launches,” I said. The princess’s food donation had been accompanied by a renewed flurry of rocket launches—old-style lifters carrying men by the thousand to low orbit, where Legion shuttlecraft waited for transfer to those ships bound out-system.

Another bottle struck the window, made Selene jump as it shattered.

“Someone should stop them,” Cassandra said. “Sir Verus?”

The Excubitor gave no sign. It obeyed only Selene. And the Emperor. And myself.

“No,” I said, echoing Selene. “Anything we might do will only make matters worse. The important thing is to get back to Fort Din as quickly as may be.”

Catraeth was built atop a plateau, a massif ejected from the planet’s heart by slow chiliads of uplift. The result was a city uneven, with streets and whole neighborhoods rising or falling above the main level of the city, with Fort Din situated at the one end on a rise higher than even the palace of the governor-general. The main road—Tower Street—which ran from Mother’s Square to the fortress did not run straight, but wove around or pierced the lesser rises that held the city’s once-wealthier neighborhoods.

Despite the relative warmth of the day, there were fires burning in trash bins, and men huddled about them.

“What are they doing?” I could hear the concern in Cassandra’s tone. The disgust.

“Grilling rats,” I said. “Rats . . . cats . . . pigeons, whatever they can catch.”

Well I could imagine the look on poor Cassandra’s face. “Cats?”

“Better than nothing,” I said, and marked the look of nausea on Selene’s pale face.

Neither woman said anything for a moment. Then Cassandra whispered, “But I like cats . . .”

Onlookers still lined Tower Street, but the fence of iron palings had

given way to fences of linked chain. Both white-clad legionnaires and city prefects in armored black patrolled the streets, stood watch at intervals.

“You’re killing us!” I heard the words distinctly, even through the thick armor of the vehicle. Beside me, Sir Verus turned its head to look.

“Murderers!” another cried, “You brought this down upon us!”

“Go back to the stars!”

I ducked my head, the better to peer up and out, over the heads of the throng lining the street to where the towers and domes of the city rose against the cloudy sky. I could just make out the black lines of the hightowers rising against the day. I felt a sense of foreboding mounting as my adrenal glands dripped their poison into my blood. I kept staring, up, up, out at the sky.

Who can say how it is the body knows such things before the waking mind? What senses must we possess, unknown to reason, that inform our very flesh? Or was it something else, some part of the gift I had received?

I had felt the levee break, seen the waters come rushing in with a noise like ten million voices . . .

. . . heard it.

The shot.

I did not see the victim, the woman caught climbing the barricade. Not until later, in the recording from her killer’s suit cam. I am still not certain it was real. If anything from that day was real. But whether or not her death occurred as I later saw it, or if something else truly happened, *something* did. Like the striking of a match in an arsenal. Like the decay of the last atom that tips the reactor supercritical.

There came a sound, a roar like the rushing of waters.

The noise of ten million voices crying, groaning, turning.

The levee *had* broken.

The barricade fell. The blood-dimmed tide—that ocean of humanity, the men and women and little children who had come to see the princess of the Aventine House and the Auctor of the Imperium—came crashing in, individuals rushing in every direction like the individual drops of a flood. Running. Stumbling. Falling. Trampling and being trampled all at once.

“Drive!” I roared, standing at once, seizing one of the leathern stirrups that hung from the padded roof above.

By the time I opened the door to the cockpit, the throng had already taken the street. Human beings, willing and unwilling, lost, angry, and afraid. Still, the driver did not hesitate, and punched the controls. The car made no sound—that I will forever remember—as we accelerated.

I remember the screams. And the noise of bodies as our car struck them. The big wheels—each with its own suspension—hardly registered their presence. Standing in the rear of the compartment, I shut my eyes a moment, heard the shouts of the legionnaires and officers. The noise of stunner fire. Guns.

“What happened?” A woman’s voice sounded at my back. “What’s going on?”

Before the words to describe the tragedy I’d just witnessed arrived, we struck *something*, and the whole of our vehicle slewed, a noise beneath my feet like the clattering of countless hooves, a grinding, shuddering clamor. A squeal. A crash. I hurtled backward into the driver’s cabin, struck the console between the two men.

Someone screamed. Selene?

My head had struck the console, but my helm had absorbed the impact.

The Martians seated over me had hardly registered me. The driver—on my left—was punching controls, while the man on my right had his hand pressed to the transceiver contacts in his helmet. “—hit an obstruction on Tower Street at Seventh. Part of the barricade gave way. The population is *in* the street. We’re surrounded. Repeat: We’re surrounded. Ninety-Nine and the Lord Shadow are aboard. Requesting immediate assistance.” *Ninety-Nine* was Selene, a reference to her place in the birth order of the Emperor’s brood.

I regained my feet, turned sharply to peer out the forward canopy. We had struck another portion of the fence that had held the sons of Earth at bay. That fence had caught beneath our wheels and had acted almost as a rail, guiding our poor, doomed vessel along until it struck first one pole,

then another, tangling more of the palisade beneath and between our wheels until the third pole stopped us in our tracks.

I had but seconds to drink in this reality, to study the terrified, furious faces outside the window—haggard and dirty. In that brief instant, I saw a heavy trash bin lifted between two men and hurled directly into the front window of a café. The panel shattered under the impact.

The crowd had become a mob, and the mob had turned to rioting.

A vast, inhuman voice rose up, and I felt the deck lurch beneath my feet. Only lately did I understand what was happening, and braced myself as the whole of our vehicle lurched beneath my feet and fell sideways.

“Cassandra!”

“Abba!”

The roll had thrown her and Selene together, sent them and Sir Verus all careering into the window that ran alongside the heavy door.

“You both all right?” I asked, picking myself up.

The cabin continued its roll, the world slowly grinding beneath us until the carriage lay wholly on its back. Not a one of us had been belted in—save the driver and his one companion, who hung suspended in their seats. It was Selene who rose first, legs folded beneath her on the tufted leather ceiling panel.

“What happened?” she asked.

“The mob turned us over,” I said, working backward. “We hit the fence.” Selene shook her head. “Why?”

I could only shake my head.

Sir Verus rose almost mechanically, more like a machine than any living man. It had activated its shield, held its blade unkindled in its hand.

Where were its fellows? Sir Aulus and the rest had been on the outside, clinging to the hull, but if the fists hammering on the alumglass windows—the faces peering in, unable to see us—were any indication, our fall had thrown them off.

“What do they want?” Selene asked, looking out at the sea of faces.

“I’m not sure *they* know,” I said, peering out into the face of one of the men in the glass. He was plebeian and no mistake, with goat-black hair and

a wide, flat face. He was squinting, trying to see through the tinted glass. Shading his eyes, he pressed his face up against the window, unaware of the fact that I was standing there, hardly a cubit away. We stood there a moment, two creatures separated by glass, as in a menagerie. But who was the specimen, and who the spectator?

“What are we going to do?” Cassandra asked, still lying on the roof that had become our floor.

“Hold here,” I said. “They can’t get in. The fort will send an air team, I —” Icy fingers closed around my heart.

The man in the window, the plebeian with the flat face . . . he was looking right at me.

I lurched back, trod on Cassandra in my haste to be away.

“Abba?” Cassandra yelped, pulled her legs in. “What?”

Had I imagined it? The man had looked away, had already been displaced by another man eager to kick at us with his armored boots. He had looked *precisely* at me, met me eye for eye. Did I dare to *look* myself, to truly turn my will and eye and *see*?

She’s here . . . I thought, and dared not utter the thought aloud. “We need to get out of here.”

“You just said we should stay!” Selene protested.

“Plans have changed,” I said. If I had seen what I thought I’d seen—*who* I thought I’d seen—there was nowhere on Gododdin that was safe. I keyed my gauntlet terminal. “Kithuun-Annaz!” I said. “This is Hadrian Marlowe. We are under attack! Repeat: We are under attack. Do you copy?”

Silence.

Cassandra had put her back against the bulkhead, was sitting with her knees pulled to her chest. “Are we being jammed?”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying not to think what I was thinking.

Sabratha. Sabratha again.

“Abba, what is it?” Cassandra asked, flinching—uncharacteristically—as a man wielding a placard on a length of pipe hammered against the window. The blow didn’t even scratch the glass, but it filled the compartment with a noise like the ringing of bells.

Did I dare tell her then, who had carried the beast within her?

“She’s here, isn’t she?” Cassandra asked. “Ushara.”

The man with the pole struck the window again, while all around us came the dull thunder of hands and feet and voices. There were people above us, *on top* of the overturned vehicle. Well I could imagine them, waving their banners, their signs.

“Down with the Devil!” they chanted, voices muffled. “Hang him! Hang him!”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was only then that I realized Cassandra was shaking—had been shaking since the crash, since the mob surrounded us.

“Death!” raw voices cried. “Death to the world-killers! Death to the false king!”

“Where is the Emperor?”

“Caesar! Caesar!”

Cassandra’s masked and faceless face looked at me. “If she’s here . . . Abba, if she’s *here*.” She had passed through death and horror as I, but the Absolute had not remade her, nor had he sent her back—only permitted her return. It had been Kharn’s machines that had saved her, and though her death had shaken Ushara’s specter from her bones, it had not freed her of the terror of all that she’d experienced.

“I know!” I said, going to one knee before her. It was not *Sabratha* again, but Danu. “Anaryan,” I lay my own hands upon her shoulders, “Listen to me, now! Listen! *If* she’s here, we’ll kill her. You and me. You and me, eh?” I put a hand on the side of her face, willed the warmth of that hand to pass gauntlet and helm alike. “All right?”

“Fear is a poison,” she whispered, breathless. The old mantra.

“No,” I said, eyes flicking to Selene, who with Verus stood above us both. “No. Fear is strength. Here.” I touched my chest, punched her in hers. Not hard. “Here. Do you feel it?”

She nodded.

“The fear is *yours*, girl. You have it for a *reason*. You’re not wrong . . .” I faltered, realizing what I’d just said, what it meant. “You’re not wrong to have it. Now, use it. *Make it your blade*.”

Her shaking stilled, and feeling it go, I knew that stillness was not of the *apatheia* desired by the scholiasts, not *ataraxia*, freedom from pain. Hers was that freedom that comes *through* pain. Not *without* fear. *Stronger* than fear.

“We can’t stay here,” she said, and her voice was firm.

“Then what do we do?” Selene asked. “We can’t cut our way out!”

“They’ll get inside,” Cassandra said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“Kithuun-Annaz!” I tried the comms again. The Irchtani had been set over the city all day. They must have seen—even if I could not reach them, they must have seen!

Salvation came then as it so often does: with horror, and without warning. The pale gold light of day turned suddenly scarlet, and turning my head I saw the carmine spray of blood as it splashed against the metal window. The man with the metal pole fell headless, his weapon clattering to the ground. One of his companions—a big man in the coveralls of a day laborer—turned as a white blur struck him, ran through him with a blazing sword.

It was Sir Aulus—or one of its brothers, they all looked just alike. The slave-knight whirled, casting the dying laborer aside with an almost lazy motion. Never in my life had I seen the Excubitors in action. The Emperor’s in-most guard—his *personal* guard—had but little need for violence, last line of defense that they were. But they were bred for violence, blood woven on the genetic looms to be the ultimate warrior. The perfect soldier. Silent, obedient, and good.

The creature moved with inexorable violence, with precision as exquisite as it was terrifying. The blood that greeted it like fountains left no stain upon it, but ran from samite and ceramic like mercury on glass, so that after every death its robe was spotless. Its hands clean.

“Holy Mother Earth preserve us,” Selene whispered, hands both going to her visor, eyes wide as bezants.

“Looks like the cavalry’s come!” said the driver, having extricated himself from the forward compartment, his companion hard behind. They

were both Martians, armored Corinthian fashion, white cloaks over red plate with the sigil of Mars—his twin moons like eyes—upon their chests.

Responding to some signal known only to itself, Sir Verus crossed the overturned compartment to stand by the door.

“Sir Verus?” Selene moved to follow, but the slave-knight extended a hand to stop her.

An instant later, the white point of a blade pierced the outer hull, carved through the armored door as if it weren’t there. The door fell inward.

The two Excubitors that awaited us—one of whom offered Selene its white-gloved hand—stood amid bloody butchery. She allowed the creature to extricate her from the overturned carriage. I followed her, with Cassandra and the two Martians just behind. The remnants of the rioters who had attacked the Imperial carriage lay all around us.

Looking out across the broad expanse of Tower Street, I could see the rioters running away, fleeing the terror and the carnage the Excubitors had wrought. There was shouting, and fell voices on the air—the rut and war cry of that most terrible of animals: man himself. There were shops burning, and shattered glass, and still the fluttering of banners and of placards as protestors clashed with old men waving the icon of the Emperor, or with prefects and soldiers in livery. To my surprise, I saw that one of the Knights Excubitor lay dead, slain by its own sword in a contest with the mob.

“We have to get the princess to safety!” I said.

“And you, lord!” said the driver.

Ignoring him, I went to Selene, keyed the shield generator at her waist. The action made her jump, and for a moment I regretted it. “We need to get off the street,” I said, pointing to a row of stately insulae rising above once-tidy storefronts. They were burning, and the line of trees before them were like the very pillars of hell.

There was no hope that way.

“The alleys.” Cassandra had emerged just behind me, her voice flattened by the helmet systems into something hardly human. Still I could hear the restraint in her tone. The control.

My girl, I thought, a spasm of pain crossing my unseen face. *My poor*

girl.

She was aboard *Demiurge* once more, revisiting that last, so-terrible battle. The hordes of men gone mad with lust and violence. She was pointing—her hand held her unkindled sword—pointing at a gap between two blocks of terrace houses, at a narrow defile just wide enough to admit a single groundcar.

“Good as anything!” I said, “Now go!”

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CHAPTER 55

THE CITY INCARNADINE

THE SOUND OF BREAKING glass, of gunfire, of shouts of mingled agony and ecstasy followed us up the alley. I kept Selene in front of me, with Verus by her side and Aulus before them. Cassandra followed just behind me, with the Martians and the two remaining Excubitors bringing up the rear.

“The whole city is burning,” Selene said.

The sound of a gunshot split the air, and turning I saw a man fall dead across the mouth of the alley behind. Metal grillwork covered the windows on the lower levels, and oriels on the levels above brought the insulae so near to one another that the occupants of one might shake hands with his neighbor across the narrow way.

“We were trying to help,” she said. “Don’t they know that?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. What mattered was getting her and Cassandra to safety. What mattered was the war. Against the Cielcin. Against the Watchers. Against evil itself. And I had seen evil—had I not? In the eyes of the man in the window? “I still can’t get the Irchtani on the line.” We ought to have been in range of the transmitters in Fort Din, unless . . .

Had all of this been . . . for me? Alexander had made no secret of his willingness to sacrifice Selene when we’d first returned from the failure at Danu. He had insisted, hadn’t he, that I be the one to distribute food to the people of Catraeth?

I looked back at the two Martians, suspicion black within me.

“Abba?” Cassandra nudged me. The sounds of violence were not far on the street behind. The conflagration was everywhere, had spread from the initial spark in all directions.

“Go on!” I said, waving her and the Martians forward. “Lead on! I’ll

hold the rear!”

We reached the next street out from Tower, found it in shambles. Men and women—mostly men—dashed about in little groups, smashed windows out of cars, buildings.

“That’s them!” shouted one, and hurled whatever it was he was holding. A brick. It smashed at our feet. “The devil!”

“Get them!” said another.

“Sir Aulus, don’t—”

The words died in my throat. Sir Aulus *did*, and did precisely what I’d known it would. Its blade, a flickering line of blue fire, tore the first of the attackers in half. The ease with which the knight had acted, and the horrors of its action, froze the others where they stood. I saw fear in every face.

There had been no fear aboard *Demiurge*. Only fever. Fire. Fell delight.

“Go back to your homes!” I said, voice amplified to fill the city street.

“We have no homes!” said one—a skinny fellow with eyes so sunken he seemed half a Cielcin. “Your war took them from us!”

“Our war?” I threw his words back at the man. “The Cielcin would destroy this world! Every world!”

“That’s no more than you’ve done!”

For a moment, I was certain again that Ushara was there, that it was she who spoke with his mouth. Did she know what I meant to do? Could do? Had she seen that much when she stalked the halls of *Demiurge*? Had Kharn’s defenses—Brethren’s design—failed?

But the man kept talking. “I had land! A home! A family before you came! We were *fine*, when it was just the Emperor. He and his lot stayed in orbit. Shored up our defenses! We were safe! Then you came, and the whole place went mad!”

As he spoke, the men on the street drew nearer, more cautious now they understood the threat of the Excubitors.

“I’m sorry!” Selene said, raised one placating hand. “Sirrah, I am sorry.”

The man spat, grasped the pike he was leaning on with both hands. He looked at Selene, an expression of disgust on his face as intense as any I

had ever seen. “You’re sorry? What good’s that to me? My wife’s dead. My children are dead, you scarlet whore!”

One of the others, a man tall and thin as a beanpole, lunged at Selene.

A bolt of light caught him in the head.

“No!” I shouted. At the dead man? At the Martian who had slain him?

The mob fell inward, closed on us from all sides.

The swords of the Excubitors rose, bright as stars and deadly. The Martians fired.

“Aulus!” I called. “No!”

The Excubitor halted, turned to look at me. Was that . . . defiance? Incredulity? Or merely the mask of a man awaiting orders?

The man with the hollow eyes had not hastened to attack himself, stood back, a sneering look upon his face. Or was it a smile?

Seeing his chance, one of the others rushed forward, carrying a sledgehammer—where had he found a sledgehammer?—and clouted Sir Aulus in the head.

“Get his sword!” cried another. “Get his fucking sword!”

The weapon had fallen to the ground when Aulus had, and though the creature stirred, it had been knocked insensate. One of the rioters ran forward, kicked the gilded handle from Aulus’s grasp. The blade vanished into the mob. One of the men kicked the fallen Excubitor in the ribs, fell back cursing. One raised his stick like the White Sword, brought it down.

I did not want to fight these people—these men I was fighting to save.

The other Excubitors were advancing, save Verus, who stayed by Selene. If I did not intervene, they would surely butcher them to save their captain’s life.

There was another way.

My fingers closed about Jaddian ivory, drew forth the shining blade.

“There he is!” said the hollow man. “Go on then! Show us, *lordship*! Show us your tr—”

One of the Martians shot the man in the face.

The men about the fallen Aulus turned, shifted back at the sight of Hadrian Marlowe standing there before them, blade blazing at his side. One

of them fumbled, yelped as Sir Aulus's stolen blade sprang forth in his hand.

"Don't try it, son," I said. "Step away from my man, there."

The boy shifted where he stood, settled into some approximation of a guard. "You don't really care about us!" he said. "We're bait is what we are! You're calling them demons down on us—that's what they say!"

"On your knees, men!" shouted the driver. "Get away from him!"

As if in answer, the man with the sledgehammer raised his weapon, brought it slamming down. The Martian fired—too late to stop the weapon clouting Aulus in the back of its head. The mob before us shattered, men pelted in every direction.

Most men believe that in war, victory is decided purely by strength, that a clash is decided simply by the gross calculation of forces. It is not so. Has never been so. So often in battle, victory is decided simply on the basis of who it breaks first. To turn and run is to die.

For all their fury, all their pain, the men of Gododdin could not stand.

Sticks and stones could not match highmatter.

Opening myself, I saw the city street unfold itself, unrolling like a carpet before me, just as Danu had in my battle with the Shiomu-Elusha.

I took a step.

The mob cursed, scrabbled backward.

From their perspective, it was as if Hadrian Marlowe had disappeared, reappeared a quarter turn to their left. I felt time and space shift beneath my feet, the fabric rocking like the deck of some immeasurable ship.

I stepped again. Kept walking. Appeared behind them, before them, to their right.

Another step.

On Sabratha, I had seen the body of a man made three, his presence refracted across our narrow three dimensions so that what was one seemed many. On Danu, I had learned that trick myself, when I had pursued the Prophet through higher space to its throne room on Dharan-Tun.

Turning my head, I saw myself as they saw me, a figure robed, armored

in black. There I was, and there, and there, and there! A ring of men about them. One . . . become five.

I raised my sword—we all did.

“On your knees!” I said, voice issuing from every one of me at once.

The mob buckled as one.

My own words echoed in my ears, the sound multiplied by every one of me. My merely human senses—my merely human mind—were not made to endure such duplication. We were one, the five of us, so that every eye fed one mind, every hand served one will. What I saw was layered one vision over the next, what I heard overlapped. Space rocked and stretched beneath me, as if reality itself rebelled at the presence of a mere mortal’s having climbed so high.

It was more than I could bear.

I slipped, fell back into myself.

I was one again, and separated from Cassandra and the others by the space of perhaps fifty cubits, on the far side of the mob. A pain hot as gledes seared behind my eyes, and I swayed, clutching at my mask with my free hand, sword cleaving the air before me to fend off all comers.

The man who had stolen Aulus’s sword rounded on me. Seeing his chance, he ran at me, striking for all his pain. Dazed as I was, I could not raise my sword in time.

A ray of light clove through the man’s torso, slashed through him from shoulder to kidney. Surprise colored the poor man’s face, and he fell into my arms, Aulus’s sword tumbling from nerveless fingers. I caught him, held him a moment as his face turned to look at me. The hand he had raised to take my life a moment earlier rose and touched my face. His lips moved, but only blood came out.

I lowered him gently, unable to speak.

“Murderers!” The cry came from down the street. “Butchers! Killers! World-killers!”

“Abba, we have to go!” Cassandra was making her way toward me, sword out but unkindled in her hand.

“Hang the Devil! Cut him down! Down!”

“Down with the Devil! Down! Down to hell!”

Her words reached my ear as through a thick wall of stone. I looked at her, at Fort Din rising like the White Sword above us all.

The mind commanded, the body obeyed. Step by faltering step, I advanced, my own sword flickering in my hand. I stumbled toward Cassandra, who wrapped her arm about me shoved me toward the Excubitors.

“That’s him! The Devil!” shouted an old woman, voice shrill as ravens. “Get him!”

We ran, the remaining Excubitors propping the nigh-dead Aulus between them, its feet dragging on the pavement.

The gates of the fortress were as yet some miles away. Still more shops ran along the street at either side, the groundcars and iron chariots parked before them shattered and burning, smoke rising into the clear air, the tops of each infernal column blown to vaults of low cloud by the wind above the insulae.

Above.

Surely the Irchtani must see us. Surely they must come.

But if we could get higher, if we could set ourselves up above the streets, we might draw the attention of the birds in the air. Absurdly conscious of the action of every capillary in my head and of the hammering in my heart, I pushed myself forward, outpacing Cassandra and Selene and the nameless Martians. I might cut our way into any of the buildings I wanted, but to do so was to leave a blazing marker as to which way we had gone. The towering white cylinder of what once had been a banking center rose to our left, more than twice as tall as the hotel beside it, and thrice the height of the insula beside that. It stood at the corner of one of the larger cross-streets, across from a small-scale flier park.

It would be our death to reach the cross-street, I knew. There another wave of chaos waited. Already I could hear the cries of “Devil! Devil!” and “World-Killer!” ahead of us, see the placards. They had not seen us. Not yet—had only to turn. What knots there were in the road before us fell back at the sight of our swords.

Then I saw it at last: the thing to freeze my blood. Despite all the horrors of the day, here was the thing *most* horrible.

Banners of black, each one crudely dyed and painted—no two quite alike. They had been Imperial banners once, gonfalons hanging from poles. But where the Imperial sun had shone, each bore a new device. For an instant, I feared to see the White Hand there, and recalled what Argo had said about the *scarheads*, about the men who willingly took Cielcin lords.

The truth was more terrible.

Upon each banner—painted in red like fresh blood—was a simple five-pointed star.

I had seen those banners before, in the visions Ushara had tried to sell me, those promises of a kingdom of night. They were there. Then. A piece of one threatened future lodged in the now. I had only to go to them, to hammer this mob into an army. We could take Fort Din, besiege the citadel and the bastille, put to death my enemies. I was Auctor already. Why not *Emperor*? I could rule, and rule alone. Ushara's future need not come to pass precisely as she had painted it. I did not *need* her, did I?

"Halfmortal!" my adherents cried. "Halfmortal! Halfmortal!"

"Hadrian King!"

I felt myself take a step. The road seemed to contract before me, almost as it had at the coming of the Prophet.

"Hey, mister! What are you doing?"

I thought I had imagined the voice at first. A faint, hoarse rasp. And I knew—in that way we *always* know—that those words were meant for me.

I halted, sword still in hand, and looking round saw the voice's owner: a boy—he could not have been more than ten standard—crouching in the shadow of a service alley to my left. He wore a shabby purple coat and faded trousers, and his shoes were all but worn through. He looked as though he had not washed in weeks. His dark hair hung limp across a high forehead, and his plebeian face—somehow round and square at once—showed a permanent flush beneath a layer of grime.

"You're him, right?" the boy asked. "The one they're looking for?" His eyes went wide when Selene caught up to me, pressed her shoulder against

mine. He averted his gaze at once, bowed his head. “This way!” He beckoned me toward him, toward the mouth of the alley.

I had the merest instant to make a decision.

I chose to trust him, not knowing in the moment why I did so. Taking Selene by the hand, I darted toward the alley, past the as-yet-untouched façade of a restaurant whose etched windows declared the name of the establishment: *The Coalhouse*.

The boy went ahead of us, through a side door into the Coalhouse’s scullery. The place was brightly lit, with brushed metal tables and minutely tiled floors. Paper crates stood in piles by the door, showing labels for various products that surely had not been available for months or more: tinned tomatoes, wine from far Riata, cured meats from Dinogad.

All were empty, and—judging by the omnipresent dust in what once had surely been a spotless, professional kitchen—had been that way a long time.

Seeing that there was no cabal of armed men lying in wait, I relaxed.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Me, sir?” The boy looked up at me, blinked. “Kit, sir.”

“Why are you helping us?” Cassandra pushed forward. “Who sent you?”

The boy shook his shaggy head. “No one, miss. There’s no one, I—”

“You’re alone?” My daughter’s voice was intent.

“Alone?” The boy faltered, and he nodded. “The family . . . they went away. I worked here. Cleaned up. Only one left, I . . .” He was staring up at me, eyes wide as moons. “You’re really him, aren’t you? Hadrian Halfmortal?”

Restoring my sword to its holster, I answered the boy. “I am.”

Kit ducked his head. “Canton didn’t think you were real.”

“Who’s Canton?” asked Princess Selene, voice gentler than that of either Marlowe.

Kit’s eyes touched Selene’s face, and he flushed more intensely. “He . . . worked here, ladyship. Him and me . . . we were friends.”

Selene bent as she addressed the boy. “Where is he?”

Kit shook his head. “Dead, I think. Or gone offworld.”

“Is there a way up to the roof from in here?”

“The roof?” The boy thought about it for half a moment. “Sure, sir. Through the bazaar.”

“Show us.”

The little boy led us through the Coalhouse proper. Tablecloths checked white and red still covered round tables, though many were overturned. Kit led us out through an inner door onto a kind of interior street. The first floor of the insula block had been filled with shops for the support of the families living on the levels above. It was abandoned—indeed it seemed the whole of the building had been abandoned. Had its occupants taken to the streets? Gone to the camps? The building was still serviceable. The lights worked, and the climate control.

They might be dead.

Half crouching, Kit led us along that inner hall, past the arched glass doors that led to the main street. I could see the rioters outside, through the metal grills that had been pulled across the doors and chained. Next we passed the doors that opened on the building’s inner courtyard—like so many insulae, the structure was built on a hollow square, enclosing a private outdoor space for the enjoyment of the building’s occupants.

“Here!” he said, opening the door to a dingy stair. “The lifts are out, so this is the only way.”

Addressing the Excubitors, I said, “Can you carry Sir Aulus?”

One of the two creatures holding the wounded captain nodded.

“Thank you,” I said to the boy, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

To my surprise, the boy bridled, and darting past me, mounted the stairs ahead of me, saying, “Follow me!”

I counted the doors as we went. Three. Five. Eight. Twelve. Fifteen.

The sun of Gododdin greeted us as we reached the rooftop, its pale light infinitely remote. Smoke rose all over, pillars of a temple black as night. Below us countless sirens wailed, and the flash of stunner fire and of killing light was like lightning without thunder.

“We should be safe here,” Cassandra said, sweeping the rooftop. There was only one way up, and the roof of the next insula was bare and level,

according us a clear view of all approaches. “You two!” Cassandra gestured at the two Martians, “Cover the door.”

The Martians obeyed her without question, even as the two Excubitors laid their captain on the concrete. Sir Verus stayed close by Selene, who went with Kit to the rail.

The riot had not reached the rooftops—though I could see men and women on balconies further down, overlooking the streets, and little children pointing, peering down in terror.

“Kill the world-killers!” The noise rose up from below, thunder to the lightning of the guns, punctuated by screams. “Kill them! Kill them all!”

“What have we done?” The voice in my ear was Selene’s, spoken over private comm.

“This wasn’t our doing,” I said, moving to stand beside her.

“Wasn’t it?” Eyes wide and green as celadon shone at me.

“It wasn’t *your doing*, Selene.”

“They’re destroying their own city,” she said.

“We’re doing all we can.”

“That’s what made it worse,” she said. “If I hadn’t come down here . . .”

“They’d have found something else.”

“We can’t stay here,” she said. “Down here, I mean. On the planet. They’ll attack the fortress. The landing field. If they haven’t already.”

I craned my neck, tried to see the landing field beyond and beneath Fort Din, but it was impossible. The field lay at the base of the massif, concealed by the ramparts of the fort itself.

“Is it *her*?” Cassandra’s voice was shaking, but her stance was firm. “Abba?”

I could only shake my head. “I thought I saw her,” I said, putting the city to my back. “For a moment. In the car. One of the men outside looked at me—right at me—through the armorglass. But now I’m not so sure.” I heard a woman’s cry from the street below, and turning saw a young lady pelt away from one knot of men as two chased after her, tackled her to the pavement.

Man was monster enough.

I turned my face away, a sensation of poison leaching into my veins.

There was nothing I could do, not without betraying our location to the mob.

“Do you see the Irchtani?” I asked, looking up into the sky.

Cassandra joined me, shading her eyes despite her helm’s entoptics. “Is that one, there?”

I followed her gaze to a small smudge high in the sky, used my own helm’s magnification to get a better look. Sure enough, the image resolved, revealed one of the bird men, black feathered against the sky.

“How are we going to get their attention?” Selene asked.

Cassandra let her hand fall. “We don’t have any flares.”

“Swords,” I said. “Draw swords!”

I drew my own, kindled the blade like fire. Cassandra did the same, and the three conscious Excubitors with her.

There was a risk, I reflected, hurrying along the rooftop, blade raised over my head like a torch. *If* Alexander was against us, if he had orchestrated this riot to attack us, then we were painting a target on ourselves bright as any we could.

“Fan out!” I said, waving my sword like a baton.

“What if they don’t come?” Cassandra asked.

“What if *who* doesn’t come?” asked the boy, Kit.

I ignored him, leaped up onto the wall at the inner edge of the insula, overlooking the withered garden in the courtyard down below. I heard a crash from the street beyond, saw a plume of fire rising as a groundcar’s fuel cell overloaded and the hydrogen tank erupted in pale flame, black smoke gouting heavenward.

“They’ll come,” I said.

“Who?” Kit was standing just below me.

I met his eye, recalling Cassandra when she had been his age.

“You know the story of Simeon the Red?” I asked.

The boy shook his shaggy head.

“Just wait.”

Cassandra had reached the opposite corner, and the other Excubitors—Verus and its brothers—were spread between us. Her empty sleeve spread

in the wind like a banner, like a wing. Selene had followed the boy, laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, Annaz,” I said. “Don’t fail me now.”

We hadn’t long to wait.

A cry—high and piercing—fell from the heavens above, and looking up I saw broad, feathered wings tuck as their owner plunged toward us like a bolt. Kit gasped and crouched at the sound, and tears filled his eyes, and Selene knelt with him, wrapped her arms about the child to keep him from running off.

The wings snapped open at the last moment, flapped once, twice, three times. Then the bird man alighted on the wall beneath me, hopping from one foot to the next. The little creature—taller than the boy by only a head—bobbed in the Irchtani approximation of a bow. “Man-Commander Marlowe, sir,” he said, and touched his face with one scaled hand in awkward salute. “We lost you at Tower Street.”

“That is well,” I said, leaping from the wall to stand by Selene and the boy. “What is your name, soldier?”

“I am Rizhaa, Man-Commander.”

Rizhaa. I recalled the name. He had fought with Annaz to take the machine core back from Kedron’s men in the Battle of Vorgossos. His feathers were black, a stark contrast to his auxiliary khaki. He wore no suit—the Irchtani were immune to the plague. Spying his rank insignia, I said, “Very good, Rizhaa. We are nine—and one of the Excubitors is grievously wounded. How quickly can your people carry us to Fort Din?”

“I have flares!” said he, drawing his gun from its holster.

I nodded my assent, and he raised the weapon and fired.

Selene shielded poor Kit’s eyes as the bright light blazed. They would see it on the street, I realized, and perhaps many would come, but they would not pass the Martians on the stairs. I let loose a shuddering breath.

We had made it.

“What is that thing?” Kit asked, peering wide-eyed over Selene’s shoulder.

Rizhaa squawked, fixed the boy with one black bead of an eye. “I am

one of Ishaan Irchtani,” he said. “A fighter! A friend.” He hopped toward the princess and the ragged child. Looking at Selene, he said, “This is one of your grubs?”

“A child?” she asked. “Yes. Not one of mine.”

Rizhaa blinked. “Does it come with us?”

I realized then that I had not included the boy in my count. A dozen considerations ran then through my mind, not least that the child might be infected. Not a single consideration mattered. Cassandra had joined us by then, having hurried back with the Excubitors, one of whom knelt by Sir Aulus’s prone form to check its vitals. The creature rose, removed its cape, and lay it over the body of Sir Aulus.

We were nine again.

Something about the boy had given me pause, caught in the back of my mind like a burr to my cloak. I looked back at him, his round face and unwashed hair. Something about his coat? The violet reminded me of . . . something—I could not remember.

It was the eyes, I realized. It was the eyes that had caused me to trust him so quickly.

They were the same green as my daughter’s.

“Yes,” I said at last. “He does.”

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CHAPTER 56

PHOBOS AND DEIMOS

CATRAETH WAS LIKE A carpet unrolled beneath us, one cast untidily over a smoldering fire. The city was ruined, would never recover. It might have been saved, in a year or five, or more—but the world had less time than that. Gododdin was ending. The poor knew it in their bones. And so they took what they wanted, did what they must.

Annaz himself carried me from the fire, over the burning buildings and wild streets to where Fort Din rose. I could see the horde in the streets, see makeshift torches and clubs and captured firearms discharged.

“They mean to attack Fort Din!” Annaz croaked. “There will be battle!”

“No!” I called back. “There will be a massacre! They cannot hope to win!”

“Then why attack, *bashanda*?”

“Because they have nothing left!” said I, clinging tight to the birdman’s ankles. His talons were clamped tightly round my pauldrons, but still I feared to fall. I could see three of the others just below us: Cassandra and the two Excubitors—Titus and Lucius. Lightercraft had been deployed from the fortress: fast Sparrowhawks circling, and slow Ibises carrying squads of men for deployment. I marked the shuttlecraft of the urban prefects, their sirens red and blue, and saw many one-man chariots rushing now over buildings and through the air above riotous streets, dodging missiles hurled at them by the angry populace while blaring their automated warnings that those below should disperse or face punitive action.

“Set us down in the inner yard!” I said.

The Irchtani commander began his descent, spiraling as a vulture spirals, ever lower, and lower, and lower. When at last we were within two cubits of the surface, he let me fall, the first of our little party to reach terra firma.

Cassandra alighted an instant thereafter, and the Excubitors with her. I caught Selene in my arms, noted the look of abject terror in her face as I lowered her shaking to the ground. “You get used to it,” I said.

The princess adjusted her suit as best she could, looked up at Rizhaa—who had borne her. “I don’t think I ever will, thank you,” she said, clasping her hands before her. To the Irchtani, she said, “Thank you, sir bird.”

Rizhaa croaked in answer, set down gently.

“I got him!” said one of the Martians, hurrying past with arms outstretched. With a yell, Kit fell into the man’s arms.

“Lord Marlowe!” A man in the livery of the common Legion hurried forward. “We heard you were attacked in the city!”

“What have you heard?” I asked. More legionnaires were hurrying from the fortress.

The fellow shook his head. “Rioters broke the fence on Tower Street. Martians put them down.”

“I want the man who fired that first shot!” I said. “You understand me?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Very good!” I said, maintaining my distance. “I need a full decontamination team for my party and the birds, and a quarantine pod and full medical examination for the boy.” I drew Kit before myself, one hand on either shoulder. “He is not to be questioned or harmed in any way.”

The legionnaire cocked his head, and despite his helmet visor I sensed the frown there.

“He helped us escape the city,” said Selene.

The soldier looked at Kit again. “I’ll get the hazard squad.” He turned his back, hand already on his comm.

“Soldier!” I called after him.

“Lord?”

I squinted, tried to get the measure of the man—no easy task, through all that armor. “Have you had any trouble with the comms?”

“No, sir. My lord. Comms have been all-clear.”

I let the man go, drew back, eying the main spire of the fortress with renewed suspicion. The soldiers retreated, with but a few hanging back. The

lethovirus was airborne, but there was little risk of transmission out-of-doors. Sunlight destroyed the virus on clothing and other surfaces in less than ten minutes of exposure, absent moisture and other factors.

The hazard squad emerged within minutes, dressed in padded white coveralls with the standard legionary helmet, two of them leading a gurney with the quarantine bubble overtop. A cloud of orange antiviral mist arose, spewed from hoses attached to packs carried on the backs of two others. It was a protocol I'd grown all too familiar with. After this initial cleansing, we would be taken inside, passed through a kind of airlock where we would be decontaminated again and made to undress before a third, final decontamination and medical evaluation could be made. Only then would we be permitted to return to the fortress.

It was not a perfect system, and even still most elected to wear their suits nearly all the time—and applied the iodine antivirals to eyes and nose and mouth at regular intervals. But it had proved effective enough.

It took a measure of doing to convince Kit to get in the pod. “They’re not going to hurt you,” I said. “These men are going to make sure you don’t have the rot, son.”

“I don’t have it!” he’d said, shying away.

How many people—how many bodies—had he seen carted away?

I’d had to kneel and look him in the eye, an almost hollow gesture, masked and armored as I was. “I owe you my life,” I said, willing him to see the smile. “I won’t let any harm come to you. These men . . . they answer to me. They just want to make sure you’re not sick. You understand?”

He nodded and haltingly permitted himself to be led to the pod and carted off. We watched him go, orange mist still swirling in the air.

“What are you going to do with him?” Cassandra asked, transmitting for my ears only.

“I don’t know,” I said as the medical team vanished through the door. “I couldn’t leave him there . . .” I had myself been alone on the streets once, a very long time ago. “I’ll let Neema know we’ve a new addition. He can put the boy to work.”

Cassandra sniffed. “Neema will love that.”

“He’ll come round,” I said. The boy might be sent to *Demiurge*, might join Victor and Irene and the other Danuan children whose parents had refused the freeze.

“We need to find my brother,” said Princess Selene, speaking up. “We have to *do* something.”

“We do,” I said. The city would need the full weight of martial law. Whole chiliads would need to be deployed to retake and to hold the city. Rioters would be shot. Looters hanged. Rapes and murders would be avenged with yet more killing.

And the men that cursed the names of *Earth* and *Empire*, of *Avent* and *Marlowe* and all the rest would curse more bitterly still, though I bent the Empire and Jadd and the rest as hard as I could in the cause of their salvation.

I knew, even then, that our efforts—my efforts—would not be remembered.

Only our failures.

Such is the nature of things.

• • •

With the initial decontamination complete, the hazard squad formed up to escort us to intake. We did not follow Kit through the inner door to the annex and the medica reserved for legionary personnel, instead left the yard via a sloping tunnel cut in one of the walls that carved Fort Din’s original keep into sections, emerging on the road that ran from the central tower to the main gate. There, many men were rushing here and there, while all the while rod-wielding centurions barked their orders and lashed their underlings with vicious blows.

“Make way!” shouted the Martian driver, brandishing his lance. “Make way for the Lord Auctor!”

A channel parted for us, men leaping aside to fumble a bow or salute

with shouts of “My lord!” and “Lord Shadow!” and “Princess!”

We had nearly reached the steps to the gate where once Royal Knight Sir Hadrian Marlowe had been greeted by Castellan Osman. A colossus—one of the six-legged Hercules class—was waiting on the tarmac before them, its deck crawling with the men of the Martian Guard.

“Lord Marlowe!” Amon Kosis shouted from the deck half a hundred feet above. He was fully armored, but easily distinguished by his striped, transverse crest and by the lion-skin mantle draped over his white Martian cape. “We heard you were returned! And the Princess Selene!”

“All unharmed,” I said, discounting the dead Excubitors. “Where is your master?”

“The Prince Regent?” Kosis asked, voice superhumanly amplified. “On his way. He wishes to lead the pacification efforts himself!”

Cassandra muttered, “I’m sure he does.”

I patted the air with a hand to quiet her. “The city is overrun!” I said, amplifying my own voice to match. “We need fire teams on the ground within five blocks of the parade line!”

“It’s already been done!” said Kosis, hands on the gunwale up above. “I’ve just authorized acoustic countermeasures be used against the civilian population.”

I grimaced. Acoustic weapons were—as crowd control measures went—on the gentler end of what was possible. The weapons, affixed to the underside of low-flying hovercraft, emitted a loud, infrasonic sound that—properly tuned—resonated with the human body. The immediate results were migraines, nausea, and the immediate evacuation of the stomach and bowels.

“Good!” I willed myself to speak. “These are our people, Lord Commandant! Let us not lose sight of that.”

How many of *our people* had I seen slain that day already—for my sake?

Kosis thumped the rail with a fist, turned to shout further orders to his men. Placing a hand on the small of her back, I leaned toward Selene. “We should get you to safety.”

“I am safe here,” she said, looking back out from the steps over the sloping road to the gates of the fortress. “Your arm is shield enough.”

I spared the woman a long look. Did she not understand the danger? I teetered on the steps a moment, contemplating what I should say—how I should say it, tell her that what had just happened was likely an attempt on the part of her dear brother to have the both of us killed. But Selene smiled, touched my arm. “Better here than in the tower.”

I tensed at the contact. She understood then, perfectly.

Just then, the doors opened on the steps above us, and a pair of signifers carrying the Imperial standard emerged, fanned out left and right. Four quartets of Martian legionnaires emerged thereafter, each with lances ready, followed by a pair of Excubitors.

The Prince Regent’s honor guard.

The Prince Regent himself appeared a moment after. He had found a golden faceplate to complete his helmet, and of gold was the coronet set about the white enamel of his casque. The cloak that fluttered from his shoulders was red as new blood, richly embroidered with golden thread, with a white leopard’s pelt about his shoulders in the high Martian style.

Seeing his sister and myself at the bottom of the steps, he halted.

“Lord Marlowe,” he said. “Dear sister. I am relieved to find you well.”

If he truly cared for his sister—as he had when they were young—he would have addressed her first.

“Alexander,” I said, “Lord Kosis says you mean to lead the police action.”

“I do,” he said. “I’ve my Imperial Master’s example to live up to. Father always said a man should *lead*, not merely *command*.”

That sounded like old William, and I nodded.

But Selene said, “Be careful, brother. The people are angry. Desperate.”

“We’re trying to save their sorry hides,” said the prince, coming down the steps, one hand forever on his sword. “No matter. These rubes have no weapons. We’ll soon have them in hand.”

“They’ve one weapon!” I said. “The plague. We would do well to limit the number of personnel we commit to the ground.”

Alexander raised a hand, flicked his wrist lazily, as if dispelling a foul smell. “Yes, yes, Lord Marlowe, we know.” He turned his head, distracted, and looked back the way he had come. “We need but make a few examples. The acoustic weapons will do most of our work for us. It’s hard to keep fighting after you’ve shit yourself.”

As he spoke, a coterie of other persons emerged. I recognized Prince Matthias—ever his younger brother’s shadow—similarly garbed, if less regally, and Lord Tarquin. The Prince-Prior dressed in Chantry black with the outline of Earth glowing on his chest. A squad of Chantry Sentinels stood behind him, looking like a row of glistening beetles. Cantor Yod stood among them, remarkable in his singularity. His armor bore no device or ornamentation, unless it was the gold-foil color of his visor, a smooth, polished hemisphere.

“I want to know how this started,” I said.

“As do I,” Alexander said, looking to the newcomers.

“Whereas I would like to know how matters so quickly got out of hand,” said Prince Matthias. “Where was Special Security? Our sister was almost *killed!*”

Taking the baton from his brother, Alexander said, “You ought to have remained with the convoy. You put Selene’s life in greater danger taking her away.”

“We were surrounded!” said Cassandra.

Alexander turned just his head to look at her. “Had you remained with the convoy, you would not have been. As it is, we now have the optics of the Lord Auctor’s personal transport plowing through a crowd of defenseless plebes to deal with . . .” He faced me bodily, as if in the fencing round. “You really made a mess of this, *Lord Shadow*.”

“*Apha!*” Cassandra cursed. She thrust a finger at the ground just at Alexander’s feet. “Snake! You set this up!”

It was almost certainly true. But it was the worst thing she could have said.

Once more Alexander made that flicking gesture with his gauntleted hand. “This was your father’s project, and your father’s failure. Now it falls

to me to pick up the pieces!” He modulated his suit’s speakers, twisting the dial on his gauntlet to boost his little speech until it filled all the plaza. “It is *my* people who are killing themselves out there. Someone has to stop them. Who, then, if not Alexander?” He looked to his brother. “Matthias, Lord Tarquin! With me!”

With that, the lesser princeling and the black-clad Sentinels made for the lift that would carry them up onto the Hercules. Alexander turned on the platform as the guard slid across, beat his breast in salute.

The lift began its ascent, carrying the Prince Regent and his close companions up into the bowels of their war machine.

The prince had scored his point.

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CHAPTER 57

THE SUBTLE POISON

ONE COULD NOT HELP but admire the trap the prince had set. It was . . . exquisite. A masterpiece of political maneuvering. A thing designed in such a way it could not fail. At its extreme end, it might have proved my undoing. It was not difficult to imagine Hadrian Marlowe dead, martyred, murdered by the very people he'd fought so tirelessly to save. Had I been killed, it would have been a small matter to compel my party—Edouard, Orphan, and the rest—to surrender *Demiurge*.

But I was *better* than dead. I was disgraced. Dead, Hadrian Marlowe might rise again. Disgraced, I could hardly stand. Insofar as the public was concerned, I had instigated the riots. It was *my* Excubitors who had cut the mob to ribbons, my Martian Guards who had shot those poor, defenseless people in the streets. These facts aligned so neatly with the rumors that were already there that they turned lies to truth in the minds of every man and woman in the bleeding city.

I went into Catraeth the following day, saw where Alexander's men and the urban prefects had wrapped the bodies of the fallen and piled them high in Mother's Square. There were hundreds dead. Peasants and soldiers alike. The Legions had made a cordon around the city center, and so I was spared the worst of the jeering. I heard it, still, and saw hatred on the disfigured faces of those damned to remain in that hideous place.

So long as I had known it, Catraeth had been a spotlessly clean city: its streets orderly, its buildings limewashed or else clad in white stone, with stately trees and silver fountains playing all throughout. There was something terribly wrong in seeing it so disfigured. Broken, battered, burned. Windows smashed. Doors staved in.

But it was the graffiti I remember best.

WORLD-KILLER! DEVIL!
HANG THE DEVIL. THE DEVIL!
YOU BROKE THE WORLD.

The image of a man—black haired, red eyed, horn crowned—dominated one wall of the Grand Sanctum. It was myself, hideously transformed, eyes wide, slit pupiled, red as the horns that thrust out from under my hair between the words *FALSE KING*.

“They don’t know any better,” Cassandra said, standing close.

“That’s just the problem,” I told her.

The prince’s fliers still circled overhead, endlessly repeating the same message: that all who heard it should remain in their homes until further notice. Alexander had made himself a hero. Certainly he had ordered the worst of the rioters shot or hanged, but that was only the prerogative and exercise of justice, and a comfort to all those who had survived.

There were other images—they seemed to have sprung up like mushrooms in the night despite the prince’s curfew. One particularly lurid example showed a crude drawing of a man—apparently myself—seated, arms crossed—atop the contorted shape of a woman, their bodies joined at the nethers, a crown fresh fallen from her head.

THE DEVIL SITS HIS THRONE, read the artist’s scrawl.

Posters advertising Selene’s food donation were commonly defaced, garishly enhancing her anatomy, or else painting a blindfold over her eyes. Alexander’s men were already hard at work scouring these away, but it would not matter. Fresh images would take their place, and more, and worse.

We had been the made villains. Alexander had made himself the restorer of the world—never mind that the people were still hungry, still dying of plague. Within days, he had resumed the process of removing refugees offworld, and the cries of “Our Prince! Our Prince!” and “Earth! Earth!” filled the landing fields.

And there were other cries among them.

“Hang the Devil!”

“Caesar soon!”

In the weeks that followed the riot, I kept to the fortress, attended meetings in council, but little else. There was nothing left to do. Nothing, unless it was wait for my men to find the answers I sought.

To find the man who started it all.

But when they did find him, they found nothing at all. Only a legionnaire—old and tired, a moon-faced plebeian whose honest eyes betrayed neither malice nor cunning.

“I saw they were going to break the fence is all, the way they were carrying on,” he said, eyes darting to the black reliefs that decorated either wall.

I could sense the terror in the man. I had ordered him brought aboard the black ship I had brought down from *Demiurge*, met him in the stark, nearly empty bridge. My two Excubitors, Sir Titus and Sir Lucius, stood behind him, while Cassandra stood at my right hand, dressed in Marlowe blacks.

“Someone had to stop them, lord.”

“And that someone was you, was it?” I asked, trying to read the truth in the man’s face. “Was it, M. Laban?”

The man shuddered at the sound of his name, bowed his head more deeply. “I—we had orders to shoot anyone that got onto the road.”

“That you did,” I said, leaning back. I looked to Cassandra. Her face was unreadable as weathered stone. There was . . . nothing. Nothing in his manner, his movements, his history to suggest the man was compromised. He seemed precisely what he was, an old soldier, ragged and worn like so many others.

Did I have the wrong man?

Bassander Lin’s own security personnel had scoured the suit footage from every man who had been a part of the convoy. Drivers and gunners, foot soldiers and chariot drivers and armored cavaliers. Laban’s suit footage had clearly shown him at his post along the highway, keeping watch over his portion of the palisade. A mass of gaunt protestors—men and women alike—had pressed up against the fence before his position, held it, shook it, hurled bottles and rocks up overtop. One had struck Laban’s helm, and he’d

staggered, and in that moment a woman with long, windblown hair had leaped up the fence like some species of ape.

Laban had shot her, struck her full in the face.

“Only . . .” Laban hesitated, shifted on his booted feet, “only if I’d known . . . Lord, if I’d known it’d have set the city on fire, I wouldn’t have done it. By Mother Earth, I swear.”

“No one put you up to it?” I asked, gripping the arms of the captain’s chair. “Paid you to do it?”

“What?” Laban’s eyes were round as his face. “Only the Emperor’s coin.”

He meant his salary.

How I longed for the power to peer into men’s hearts, to read their minds like scrolls and know of the truth of them, as Brethren could. But the Absolute had not granted me that power, and I sensed no duplicity in the man. I held his gaze a long time, marked the creases long care had made at the corners of his mouth and eyes, the white hair like bristles. It struck me then that here was a child, a man who had lived less than a quarter so long as I, despite his senescence.

“Is something going to . . . happen to me?” Laban asked, looking hard at Cassandra.

I glared at him, hoped to frighten him . . . more than I already had. I might have had the man flogged, or hanged as a gift to the populace, a way to mollify their bloodlust and improve my standing. But would it, really?

In the end, I sent him away, tormented by the thought that perhaps Alexander had done nothing at all—had needed to do nothing. Perhaps time had been my undoing.

Pressure and time.

In the silence that followed Laban’s departure, Cassandra and I stood alone. A rare moment of total privacy, safe in the Extrasolarian vessel that served for our apartments.

“I don’t think there’s any more to him than that,” Cassandra said.

“I think you’re right,” I said, and slumped over where I sat, head in my hands.

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CHAPTER 58

THE HAMMER BLOW

“**THIS LATEST GROUP NOW** puts the total number of our men affected by the Cielcin virus at over twenty thousand,” said Amon Kosis.

“That’s fully a tenth of our garrison down here,” said Prince Matthias, who wore a face mask attached to an osmotic filter pack slung under one arm. The masks offered some added protection—if less than a full suit.

The legate’s face darkened. “I know, my prince. They’re *my* men.”

“This was bound to happen as time went on,” said Bassander Lin, speaking from his place further down the table. “The more our people need to be in contact with the Gododdin, the more this was bound to happen.”

“Our containment and sterilization protocols are not enough!” said Matthias, looking to his brother.

Alexander shook his head. “What would you have us do?”

“We have to reduce contact between our people and the natives!” said the elder prince.

Tor Xanthippus intervened. “The soldiers who go into the city are already under orders not to breach suit integrity. The issue is with subsequent infection. Contact with contaminated equipment, food, clothing.”

“There were two men flogged on Tower Street last week for fraternizing with the locals!” Matthias said.

“Those men were punished,” said Lord Kosis. “Neither one of them was found carrying the plague . . .”

Matthias hissed. “They had *sexual* contact with three different local women—by their own admission. It doesn’t *matter* if they didn’t catch it. We didn’t *catch* them until they were returning. How many aren’t we catching at all, hmm?”

“There’s nothing to be done,” said Amon Kosis. “If the men won’t value their hides—”

“It’s *our* hides they don’t value!” said Prince Matthias. “All our hides.”

“Are we still putting the infected into fugue?” asked Bassander Lin, maintaining his composure. He looked round at the council chamber, at three concentric levels of ministers and generals, of councilors and high lords. More than half of them were holographs.

“So long as we can,” said Alexander. Fort Din had its catacombs, its cryonic storehouses. They were smaller—far smaller—than the network of tunnels and launch flumes that had undergirded the city of Resonno on Perfugium. It had been our policy since the outbreak began to inter the sick in icy beds beneath the fortress, but we were running out of space.

The prince’s words cast a dark shadow over the council, and a crackling silence settled over all like the specter of some enormous cat. The answer was obvious.

“We need to reduce our presence here,” I said, looking round at the lords still present. Nearly all those not of Sollan extraction had retreated to their ships. The Normans and Durantines, Mandarmen and Nipponese and men of the Small Kingdoms. Of the Jaddians, only Captain Azhar remained on the surface. Even Prince Kaim had retreated to his court aboard the *Mnemon*, appeared as a spectral image alongside the hairless, mustachioed captain. “The planet has little strategic value. We should conduct our affairs from orbit.”

I knew the counter that would come, and accepted it. “You would have us abandon the people here? You?” Alexander glared at me. Unlike Matthias, he wore no mask, relied only on the antivirals. A show of courage. Of resolve. “After everything *you’ve* done?”

“I would abandon no one!” I said sharply, coldly, every atom my father’s son. I sat back in my seat, arms crossed. “We should continue our evacuation efforts. But I see little reason to maintain so large a garrison here.”

“Lord Marlowe has a point,” said Tor Xanthippus, stroking his close beard. “We will never evacuate the planet, not at the rate we’re going.”

Sir Gray Rinehart—a spectral figure, his image broadcast from *Aurora*—asked the necessary question, “How many men do we need to hold the camps? A few thousand?”

Amon Kosis and the strategoi looked to one another, deliberated.

“Four, five thousand?” Kosis said at last. “Less, if we rely on aircraft.”

“Is that in addition to what remains of the urban prefects?” Rinehart asked.

Bang!

A fist hammered the black glass table, drawing every eye. It was Alexander. The prince leaned forward. “I will hear no more of this,” he said, glowering at me, at Kosis, at Rinehart’s aged and spectral form. “You think the people will not notice our leaving? That they won’t *care*?” He shook his head, leaned back. “They’ll burn the city to the ground. The whole planet.”

He was right, of course. The men we doomed to hold the surface would be facing an uphill battle. “The fact remains,” I said, “the longer we remain in this system, the thinner our resources stretch.”

“Perhaps,” said Lord Tarquin, “we should consider a phased withdrawal from the system altogether.”

I looked hard at the Prince-Prior, trying to read his unreadable face. Tarquin had pushed for the reallocation of fleet resources to feed the men of Gododdin—had suggested the measure in the first place. Now he wanted to abandon the system entirely?

He suggested it in the first place, said that part of me that yet spoke in Tor Gibson’s voice. How well I could imagine the old man’s eyes closing, his breath sighing with realization. *He suggested it.*

I smiled thinly. It had been a trap from the start. Whether they had armed poor Laban or not. Paid him. Coerced him. Or merely hoped someone like him would act and so tip the city into conflagration, they had played their cards, and played them well. Not only had they muddied my face, they had pushed the situation in the system to extremis, and for what?

To abandon it? But why? What did it profit them to abandon Gododdin?

“Quit the system?” Bassander Lin shifted forward in his seat. “And go

where?”

“The old worlds,” said Lord Tarquin. “The core systems. Their locations are known to the enemy, and they are far closer to one another than are our holdings out here. We will stand a better chance of fighting a reactive campaign in Orion than here.”

“But the Cielcin are coming *here!*” Lin said.

“According to Lord Marlowe,” said Tarquin. “But where are they, Strategos? It is nearly three years already since you returned from Danu—in failure, I will add. How long before we must consider the possibility that they are not coming?” He thrust a hand in my direction, palm up. “We are very thinly stretched. Food. Water. These will hold, particularly given our reduced numbers. Recycling. Hydroponics. But fuel?”

“We’re not using AM at all,” Bassander Lin countered, “and we’ve ample helium in-system for the fusion reactors.”

“That isn’t so,” said Tor Xanthippus. “The helium demands of the joint fleet far outstrip our mining operations in the Oort Cloud. We are burning more than we can take in.”

“And there is uranium to consider,” said Strategos Koparkar, chin propped on folded hands. “There is very little in-system. The uranium will go first.”

Uranium. I felt a strange welter of emotion at the word. A small quantity of the fissile substance was required to jumpstart the helium fusion reactors that burned in every Imperial vessel. Every time a reactor cycled—went into cooldown to allow for maintenance. Every time a parallel reactor came online, a quantity of uranium was burned. The substance was infinitely rarer than the liquid helium that sustained each vessel’s sublight and life-support systems. Rarer, too, than the antimatter fuel that powered warp drives—as the latter was far easier to synthesize.

That was why it was still so valuable, was how my family had made its wealth.

“There *are* still supply convoys coming here,” I said, looking to the men of the Wong-Hopper Consortium whose images—robed in gray and violet—sat on the highest level of the chamber, in the place of least honor.

“The next of our dromonds does not arrive for seven years yet,” said the seniormost of the Consortium representatives.

Tarquin turned to Prince Alexander, and in a voice soft and deadly serious, intoned, “My prince, the people on the surface do not have seven years.”

Prince Alexander shook his head. “This is *my* planet,” he said, and there was a touch of the old petulance in his tone. “*My* people. *My father’s* people.” He looked round at the council. “The people of Gododdin can no longer live without the support of our fleet. The question of whether we police them or not is irrelevant. They cannot *eat* without us. If we depart, Lord Tarquin, we sign their death warrant . . .” He looked at me then, eyes like glittering jewels. “Even if the Cielcin never come.”

“I do not suggest we abandon the evacuation process,” said Lord Tarquin. “We must accelerate our efforts.”

“We cannot empty the planet *en masse!*” said Bassander Lin. “There’s nowhere to put them!”

Bassander had, unknowingly, sprung the trap.

Tarquin turned to spare a smile for Bassander. “But there is a ship, Lord Strategos.” Then he turned his face, that thing of polished marble, and looked squarely at me. “Is there not, Lord Marlowe?”

I froze, for a moment not comprehending.

A ship? What ship?

Realization hit me like an avalanche, like the crumbling of a glacier into the sea. Slowly at first, then altogether.

Demiurge. He was talking about *Demiurge*.

I sat a little straighter, arms falling to my sides. I felt Cassandra grow tense.

Demiurge. That had been their aim all along. Their goal. Their target.

“You want me to . . . open *Demiurge* to refugees?” I said.

“Why not?” asked Lord Tarquin. “You surely have the capacity.”

We did.

When first I had been a guest aboard *Demiurge*, Kharn Sagara had taken possession of some twenty thousand Imperial subjects—the price of his

cooperation. What ever became of those poor souls, I never learned. I had never seen them again.

It was only after I had won the ship for myself that I found the cubacula: the empty chambers, the racks upon racks of empty capsules, coffins waiting like beds for the sleepers that might never come. We had room for millions, and our frigates might take thousands more.

Yet I had never offered the vessel as a solution. Not out of selfishness, but because *Demiurge* was a warship, because I intended her to go to war.

“You rescued thousands from the surface during the battle at Danu, did you not?” asked Lord Tarquin. “What is your capacity?”

“I . . .” I looked to Cassandra, to Bassander Lin, to Olorin’s holograph flickering alongside cold-faced Captain Azhar. There was nothing any of them could do to save me. How could I answer? There was no lie to weave, no tale to tell, no excuse that I could give that would there be believed.

Leviathan had me in its coils.

I shut my eyes.

The Sword of Damocles had fallen, and its point had struck true.

The truth, then.

“None,” I said, opening my eyes.

“None?” Tarquin looked at me, false surprise overriding his little smile.

I could never accept refugees from Gododdin aboard *Demiurge*. Tarquin knew that. Alexander knew that, had known it since I arrived. Lacking the means to challenge me strength for strength, they had outmaneuvered me, attacked my *face*, my *image*.

“You won’t help us?” Tarquin asked. “You have the largest ship in this system. You must be able to take on hundreds of thousands of people. *Millions*.”

“And how many of them will be yours?” I asked.

It was the worst thing I could have said.

Painful silence filled the room like vapor, like steam. I could feel the pressure of it mounting, mounting until I thought the glass of the table must crack beneath its weight. I expected shouting, expected that at any moment one of the lords might stand and denounce me.

If I relented, the Chantry were sure to smuggle their agents aboard the ship given the chance, even if I accepted only frozen cargo. They would take *Demiurge*, and they would kill my people. Edouard and his men, Ketevan and what remained of poor Ghoshal's crew. Annaz and his fighters. Ramanathanu. Otomno. Little Darathama. Captain Soonchanged in his cell. And Orphan.

Orphan they would do worse than kill.

And the Danuans. The poor Danuans, those who had endured Ushara's touch. Then they would study. Torment. Dissect.

I could not allow it.

"You think *that's* what this is about?" Tarquin said, looking to Alexander and Amon Kosis. "We are *at war*, Lord Shadow. A war for mankind's survival! Our very *life*! You think this is about politics?"

I stood, knowing it was over. "It is precisely about politics!" I said. "It is *always* about politics! You have made that very plain."

"You would condemn the people of this planet to death?" said Lord Tarquin.

The Prince-Prior's words seemed to echo as if in some distant room, so remote did he seem from me then. My eyes were on Alexander. The dread prince, carmine and golden, sat in his throne, his hands flat upon the tabletop, his eyes hard and smiling, though his face was serene.

He had ridden Leviathan to victory, would ride Leviathan to the throne.

"Condemn them?" I asked, looking up at the triumvirs where they sat.

The Martian giant. The black priest. The hollow prince.

"Condemn them?" I asked again, voice scarce more than a whisper. "I have done more to save them than any one of you."

"Get him out of here!" said a voice from the upmost level.

"He's a traitor!" said another.

"A damn traitor!"

"Coward!"

"Hang the devil!"

That last caught my attention. Had that slogan originated here, I wondered? In that room? With these men? How many of them—like

Ohannes Douro—were subjects of that shadow kingdom, initiates in that secret order who truly had steered the Imperium of old?

Hang the devil, indeed.

There was Lord Alphonse, Gibson's own blood, standing, red-faced and furious. Half the room was on its feet—even some of the holographs were standing. Still others had signed off, their images vanishing like ghosts in the morning sun.

I felt a pit form in my stomach. These people, these miserable people, these creatures I had fought all my life to save, had twice *given* my life to save . . . Had it been worth it? Were they worth it?

A thousand years of whispers—a thousand years of poison—had done its work at last. Every rumor, every calumny, every black little truth compounded in that instant, fell upon me in that moment, and I felt my shoulders buckle, back bend beneath the weight. Bent over the tabletop before me, I saw myself staring back at me, out of that darkness below. It was the face of the boy I saw, the son of my father, face twisted in that biting smile, crooked and pained.

They said that I had caused the Emperor's sickness. That I had lied about the Cielcin threat. That the map was some conceit I'd concocted with the Extrasolarians to deceive the armada, to isolate the Emperor and the court on the frontier to better win the throne. That I was Kharn Sagara, or had inherited his ability to possess a new body after the destruction of the old—that that was how I had survived the Chantry's poison. That I had raped Selene. That I had stolen her mind and heart with the arts of Vorgossos. That Cassandra was my concubine. My clone, or Valka's.

I had heard them all before. Every one.

You must not despair. Orphan's words, Orphan's warning. *Despair alone he cannot forgive.*

"Demoniac!" cried one lesser lord.

"Magus!"

"Abomination!"

"Extrasolarian scum!"

"—not even human!"

“He wants the throne!” said Leonid Bartosz, standing. Beside him, I saw Bassander Lin stiffen, from his face knew the man was about to rise. Our eyes met, that line of fire that once had passed reformed, a bead of light and understanding.

Wordless then, I shook my head. Just once.

The old soldier did not relax, but neither did he stand.

“It’s a plot!” shouted another—the lord of some great house I did not know. “He would keep us here, while his *Cielcin friends* burn the galaxy behind our backs!”

I raised my hand. But it did not stop the shouting, did not slow the tide of condemnations. And so I had but one option left to me.

I drew my sword, and with a single blow clove the table before me, opening a path out. A path forward. The Martians posted round the room all aimed their lances, but I had stowed my blade as quickly as I had drawn it and stepped through the breach that I had made.

“Hold!” Alexander was on his feet, his hands outstretched. “Hold, damn you!”

That surprised me. I expected him to order me shot dead.

Or did he fear, rightly, the cost of my third death and resurrection?

I was standing near the center of the floor then, out in front of the Prince Regent’s little throne. Cassandra had followed me so far as the broken table, stood with her hand on her sword, her eyes narrow.

“That is enough!” I said into the brittle silence, voice rebounding off the walls. More softly then, I continued, “That is *more* than enough . . .” I glared up at Alexander, at Kosis and Tarquin, at the strategoi and scholiasts, the foreign dignitaries and lesser lords. “Three lives I have lived in your service. Three lives I have given to this war. No more . . .” I threw back my head, hand on the hilt of my unkindled sword. I felt the Marlowe smile pull across my face and—disturbed by its presence—let it fall away. “No more will I play these games. I will go now to my ship, and take my leave of you . . .” I gathered my cape in my fist and strode toward the door, hearing Cassandra’s light footfalls hurrying on the tile behind.

The Martians closed ranks before us, blocking the door.

“Tell your men to stand down, Alexander,” I said, not looking back. “I have no wish to harm them.”

No answer. No breath. No motion.

“Draw your weapon,” the Prince Regent said, “and we will have no choice but to open fire.”

I turned, faced the dais, the princes, the triumvirs. Tarquin was smiling, triumphant.

“My prince, you forget Eidyn,” I said, smiling, knowing that reminder would earn a moment’s pause. Cassandra’s eyes met mine, and I nodded, saw the Marlowe smile reflected in her face.

She leaped forward, past me, faster than any common man. She was a Maeskolos, a Swordmaster of Jadd—and more. She was *palatine*, and my child. The blood that flowed through her veins was Marlowe blood, her genome written and sequenced by the finest writers in human history. She was stronger, faster, more bloody minded.

The Martians, for all their training, were only men. What strength they had beyond the ordinary was but the gift of hormones and surgery. Cassandra had hers from the beginning. I heard one strike the wall as Cassandra caught him with a straight kick that sent him flying, heard the scuffle as she seized his lance and struck the third in his head. Another kick. A little sound. Then the door opening.

It was over in less time than it takes to write about it.

“I am still Auctor of the Imperium,” I said. At a sign, my two Excubitors—Sir Titus and Sir Lucius—both drew their blades, asserting my legitimacy and threatening reprisal all at once. “Those who would join me, may join me in orbit. I will take the fight to the Cielcin, wherever they may be.”

CHAPTER 59

PLAYING PALE

“STILL NOTHING FROM OUR Jaddian friends?” said Edouard, hurrying along in my wake.

Our bootheels rang on the metallic floor, the sound bright as the clattering of the *uthras* that parted before us. I looked back over my shoulder at the intelligence man, his face flushed, dark hair neat as ever. Cassandra was just behind him, her own face pale save where the iodine marked it at eyes and nostrils.

I did not stop. “Nothing as yet. Olorin assures me that the *Yahmazi* will find something, but I don’t think it matters anymore. They’ve played their hand.”

“So it would seem,” he said, “but I can’t understand it. If their goal is to seize this ship, they won’t simply let us go.”

“You’re right,” I said, following the gleaming line Orphan had traced in the air to guide us. “That is why we must leave at once . . .”

Cassandra and I had departed Gododdin directly, pausing only to ensure our decontamination. The journey back to *Demiurge* had taken the better part of a day. “Has anyone declared for us?”

“*Non*,” said Edouard, and it took me a moment to recognize his native Old French and not Jaddian. “But how can they? Even the Jadd stands to lose by declaring his support for you.”

“He’ll come through,” I said. “And Lin.”

“Forgive me, but I doubt it,” Edouard countered. “They know he’s your friend. There’s not a chance in hell Prince Alexander will let him leave the surface now.”

He was right, of course.

Cassandra had stopped a step behind Edouard, had put a hand on his

shoulder. “Abba,” she said, “what are we going to do? We can’t leave here. The Cielcin are coming!”

“We don’t *know* that!” I said, almost shouting. “Not anymore! I am in the dark, Cassandra, but I know that if we stay *here* those damned priests will take *everything*.” I shook my head, turned to resume my frantic pace.

Edouard’s boots and Cassandra’s clamored after mine, while ahead a pack of *uthras* little larger than true hands scuttled out of the way. I spurned one with my boot, sent it flying.

“Don’t do that!” Cassandra said. “Abba!”

Her voice made me stop.

We were nearing the occupied sections of the behemoth then, approaching the place where Cassandra had convalesced in her tank so long after the Battle of Danu, and the regions where Edouard’s men had made their bunks. I could hear the distant sounds of human voices.

“Something is different,” I said, shaking my head. Almost unthinking, one hand went to my face. The old smile, the old asymmetry had reasserted itself—just for a moment. I smiled then, felt the musculature pull up smoothly on either side. “Something’s changed. Why act now?”

“Alexander?” Edouard asked.

“That whole ilk,” I said. “Alexander, the Chantry, the Martians . . . we’ve been here for years, and they’ve done nothing. What changed?”

It was A2’s turn to shake his head. “It may be nothing. Just time.”

“Time . . .” I looked at them both. It was possible. It had taken time for the situation on the surface to degrade so badly. And the triumvirs had worked so hard and so diligently to retard the evacuation process. “Maybe, but this latest move . . . they know something . . .”

“What?” Cassandra asked.

“The Cielcin,” I said, looking to them both. “Where are the Cielcin?”

Edouard was the first to follow me. His dark eyes narrowed. “You think they’ve attacked somewhere else? That they didn’t take the bait?”

“Why would Alexander and the others cover that up?” Cassandra asked.

“To keep us in the dark,” I said. “To keep us isolated.”

Edouard was shaking his head more and more furiously. “*Invraisemblable!* If Forum were attacked, let us say, we would know. Even if the Prince Regent and his fine friends were to try and keep it all a secret, the Jaddians would hear of it. The Durantines! The Mandari! The Mikado! There would be no hiding such a thing.”

I knew that he was right, and yet . . . A hiss of air like steam escaped me, and I turned back, went a couple steps. “But they are hiding *something*.”

The Delian officer reached up under his ivory-rimmed spectacles, massaged his eyes. “It wouldn’t be possible to conceal something so big as an attack.”

“What then?”

Cassandra hurried ahead of Edouard. “Perhaps Orphan will have some idea?”

“Perhaps,” I said, “or perhaps Captain Soonchanged—”

Just then a door ahead of us opened on the right, and a group of children charged out.

“Run!” said the boy at the fore, and I was pleased to recognize Kit. The boy from Gododdin had shaved off his ragged mane and washed and dressed himself in clothes donated by one of the Danuan families. The boy led his little gang to the left, so that they ran straight toward us, faces flushed, eyes alight.

They had no notion of what trouble we were in, no thought for the world beyond *Demiurge*, no concept of the war outside. I wondered at that, and at the laughter and breathless abandon in the faces of the pack of boys and girls—I counted seven, Kit included—that tore down the corridor toward us.

Seeing us, Kit’s eyes went wide, and he backpedaled, skidding to a halt.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

As if in answer, a great, sinuous *something* leaped from the open door, scrabbling, desperate to right itself. I had a brief impression of huge, black eyes in a smooth, white face, then the creature tackled the hindmost of Kit’s little party.

“Hold!” I said, rushing forward, shoving Kit and his companions aside.

“Ijanamma! Ijanamma! Hold, I say!”

I had to lay hands on the two wrestlers to pull them apart. But when I did, both were laughing.

“It’s all right!” said young Victor, scrambling after me as I rounded on his attacker, one hand tugging on my coat. “We were just playing.”

“Playing?” I asked, looking down on the creature at my feet, which peered up at me with one ink-dark eye.

“Chase,” it said, baring a mouth full of needle teeth.

“Chase,” I said, looking to the creature’s human quarry—its *prey*.
“Tsuarubeyu oyumn o-tsuqan tutai, Darathama-kih.”

I don’t think that’s a good idea.

“Why not?” Darathama asked, and brushed unruly white hair from its face.

How could I begin to answer a question so obvious and so vast.

“You’re a good deal stronger than they are,” I said, and offered the inhuman child my hand.

“He is not!” said Victor, thumping his chest. “You saw me, Lord Marlowe! I had him!”

Victor was certainly the eldest of the group—a boy of fifteen, perhaps sixteen standard. How he’d grown since Danu. Though it was no time at all to me, the years since we had rescued him and his people from their *smygels* represented a sizeable piece of his life. Not quite half, but certainly all the years he best remembered.

“I wasn’t going to hurt him!” said the Cielcin child, taking my hand at last. “It was just my turn is all.”

“Your turn?” I looked to Cassandra, whose lip curled in disgust.

When I looked back to Darathama, it had regained its feet. Standing, the creature—the child—came up almost to my chin. Young as it was, it was larger even than Victor, who was perhaps three times its age. The Cielcin were predators, and so grew quickly, though its horns were short, round-headed things.

“They just caught me,” Darathama said, offering a very human shrug. “So it was my turn to catch them.”

“Seven on one hardly seems fair,” Edouard remarked.

Darathama shrugged again. “There’s only one of me, sir.”

That was so. Every time I spoke with the little creature, I was struck by the very human sound of its speech. It had been raised among humans, the only members of its kind its parents, and so perhaps knew the Galactic Standard as well or better than the speech of its own people.

Victor said, “Kit and me, we take turns playing Pale for the others, and so Dara here isn’t on his own.”

Dara? The pet name raised one of my eyebrows. “Playing Pale?”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Victor said. “Taking turns. Hide and seek, you know? It’s for kids, I know, but Master Argo, he and my dad said I’m to look after the littler ones here, me and Kit. And Dara’s big enough, he helps.” Victor put a hand on the xenobite’s shoulder. Darathama nodded its agreement.

“You’re bleeding,” Cassandra said, inclining her head in Victor’s direction.

The boy looked down, confused, found the long, thin scratch on his arm. “That must have been me,” Darathama said, turning to regard its human counterpart. “I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s fine!” Victor said, dabbing at the cut with a fingertip. “It ain’t deep.”

“You should be more careful!” I said, turning from the human child to the inhuman one.

Darathama ducked its head. “I didn’t mean to . . .”

“I know,” I said, “but you’re a lot bigger and stronger already.” I stooped, peered into the Cielcin’s juvenile face. “Strength demands wisdom, Darathama.”

“Yes, sir,” it said, and it struck me that yes was not a word it ought to have.

“I lost a tooth!” said a girl in the back, displaying her lack. She could not have been older than seven or eight standard, which would have made her among the very youngest of those escaped from Danu. I looked at her, smiled.

But it fell to Cassandra to laugh and say, “You lost a tooth?”

The girl nodded with sagely certainty.

“Did something happen?” Kit asked, displaying that strange sensitivity to higher matters that children often do, green eyes darting from my face, to Cassandra’s, to Edouard’s.

I did my best to smile—and it was the even, balanced smile the Absolute had given me. “I . . . yes.” I crouched, put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I need you all to run to your people, tell them we’re leaving.”

“Leaving?” the boy from Gododdin looked shocked. “We can’t leave!” He drew back, shaking his head. “You can’t leave! You’re Hadrian Marlowe! The Halfmortal! You’re a hero!”

His words were sharp as Darathama’s talons, and I stood. “I’ll explain someday. Now, run and find Neema, tell him to meet me on the bridge.” Looking to Darathama, I said, “Where is your father?”

“With Mother,” it said, “on our ship.”

“Have them both meet me,” I said, “and do what they tell you! All of you! Move along!”

• • •

Playing Pale.

The boy’s words resounded in the vaulted recesses of my skull as I made my way past Kharn’s graven *res binae* and up the stairs to the bridge. I knew that children played such games the Empire over, each taking turns with a set of antlers or paper horns. I had played such games myself, with Crispin and with the children of lesser lords of a time. That children should play at something so serious, so terrible . . . it was not right. It made the evil smaller—not in the minds of the children that played at it—but in the minds of the adults who permitted such play.

And Darathama’s participation disturbed me, though I was not certain if it was the fact of its participation that disturbed me, or the fact that it had been cast in the role of villain.

It did not matter, not for the moment. Their play was at an end.

Orphan stood waiting for us, both left hands resting on the arm of its throne.

“Master!” it said at the sight of me, left side drawing straighter.

“Father!” it said. “You called?”

“Prepare the vessel for departure,” I said.

The giant bent at my words, ankleted feet tinkling. All four eyes were wide and glaring. “Departure?” it asked.

“Departure?” It shook twin heads furiously, and the right face—the one with the black hair and crown and the voice deep as hell—thrust its finger at my face. “We must not!”

“Have you forgotten what I said?”

“—what was said?”

“We have no choice,” I said, meeting the black head’s coal-dark stare. “If we remain, they will attack this ship. It will be Vorgossos again.”

Orphan put its heads together. Presently the white-headed one spoke in its castrato. “Surely they will not risk open assault?”

“Not after Eidyn,” said the other.

“It is not open assault I fear.”

“What then?” Orphan asked. “Subterfuge? Infiltration? They will not get aboard this ship again.”

“Now we know what to look for.”

“But they may try an alternative,” I said. “Praxis?”

I had but little understanding of such things, but I knew enough to know that we were vulnerable to an attack via the datasphere, via machine plane.

“The Chantry might attempt a network assault,” Edouard agreed.

Orphan’s dark head shook itself. “We are prepared for that.”

“They might try to force our gateways,” said the other. “But they cannot do so without our noticing.”

“They can do nothing if we are not here,” I said. “And the Cielcin are not here. We don’t know where they are—and the Latarran map has given us no sign. Something is wrong, Orphan. We are being kept in the dark. The prince and the Chantry know *something*. *Something* happened.”

“If Forum were attacked, say,” said Edouard, hands on hips, face downcast. “Would there be any way of concealing that fact from the entire system? From the Jaddians? The Durantines? Everyone?”

Orphan pondered the question a moment, one head bowed, the other tipped back, pale eyes seeking an answer in the minutely graven vaults so far above our heads.

“There would be no way to stop the telegraphs from coming in,” said Edouard. “Those messages are point to point. They can’t be intercepted.”

The giant nodded, swayed where it stood, cloak drawn about itself. “The telegraphs themselves cannot be tampered with.”

“The paired particles are bonded,” its other half agreed. “They cannot be separated.”

“But the receiver—”

Orphan froze, reacting as if to some sound only it could hear. It turned, peering out toward the forward windows, over the holograph well and across that vast and echoing space.

“What is it?” I asked, and saw Cassandra tense, hand on the hilt of her sword.

Then I heard it, faint and far off. The clangor of the warship’s carillon.
The warning bell.

“What is it?” I asked, watching Orphan sink into the pilot’s chair. One left hand reached down, drew out the lead that would connect the creature to the ship, pressed the pad against one swollen temple.

“Are we under attack?” Cassandra asked.

“Receiving transmission,” came Orphan’s answer.

The bell rang again, nearer and louder. “It is the planet,” Orphan said, its right hand worrying at the necklaces about its twin throats.

“We have been targeted.”

“By what?” asked Edouard, slipping into the role of bridge officer as he rounded on the holography well. “Not the fleet?”

“Shields are activated,” Orphan said.

“Put it through!” I said, scrambling to join Edouard at the projection.

At a thought from the centimanus, the pit gleamed, displayed Gododdin

in wire frame below us, mapped the fleet as a constellation of stars in orbit about the world like some Ptolemaic model. Our orbit took us far above them all, in a broad ellipse, so that we were separated from the main massing of the fleet by two or three light-seconds.

The image—when it had composed itself in the air beyond the holography well—was a familiar one. The Prince Regent, his crowned helm upon his head, sat between Commandant Kosis and Lord Tarquin.

“Alexander!” I said. “What is the meaning of this?”

The prince looked at me, his eyes wide, face pale. Prince Matthias sat just to the commandant’s right, face as grave, as drawn, as sick to death as that of his younger—now elder—brother.

“What have you done?” The Prince Regent’s voice—when it came—was hardly more than a whisper, a breath. “You dare—” He choked, started again. “You dare ask me that question? You?”

I looked to Edouard. The HAPSIS man’s brows knit, and the corners of his mouth turned down. Orphan looked on, mouths both half-open.

“We let you leave!” the prince said. “You were free to go where you willed! Wherever you willed!” His hands gripped the arms of his chair, knuckles visibly white. “Why did you do it? In Earth’s name: Why?”

“What’s he done?” Cassandra’s voice was quiet, calm, cold.

I looked at her, saw her through the projection of Gododdin itself, her pale face illumined by that pale radiance. She looked like half a ghost. She had the truth, and faster than I. This was theater. A posture.

A move.

Shah esna.

“What is this?” I asked, meeting Alexander’s eye.

I knew the answer: war.

“Your quarrel was with *me!*” he said, a fever in his eyes as he thumped his chest. “Me! Not my people!” I could feel the knots coiling themselves in my guts as my fingers began to close about what had happened—what had been *made* to happen. “Why did you spare me? You might have destroyed this fortress if you had a mind! Why did you do it? You want my surrender?”

“You’re mad,” I said, and saw through the projection the faces of Ramanthanu and Otomno—their child close behind. Had I not ordered it to remain on board the frigate it called home?

“Mad?” Alexander turned to Tarquin a moment. “Mad? Do you know how many people were in the city? In the camps?”

The knots in me turned Gordian.

I knew what he had done. What he had *caused* to be done. “You burned the city.”

More theater: “I should never have let you leave,” he said. “I could have stopped it. I could have stopped you.”

My eyes went to Lord Tarquin, seated at the prince’s left. The Prince-Prior sat with his hands clasped, face composed—as if in prayer. But it was the figure over his shoulder that most drew my attention. The sorcerer, Yod, stood thereby, hands identically clasped. There to see his victory, I didn’t doubt.

There to gloat.

Meeting Orphan’s eye, I said, “End transmission.”

The triumvirs vanished, and Yod with them.

“What did they do?” Cassandra asked.

“Death by water,” I said. “They tried fire. It didn’t work. Now they want me drowned.”

Edouard removed his glasses with one shaking hand. “They burned the city? Catraeth?”

“Catraeth at least,” I said, and turning from him to the giant, I gave my orders: “Contact *Aurora*, tell Captain Rice I must speak with Lord Nicephorus at once. And raise *Mnemon*! I need Prince Kaim!”

Orphan gripped the arm of its chair with its two left hands, the right still worrying at its necklaces. “We are receiving messages from all across the fleet,” said the beast’s basso voice. “Shall I put them through?”

“Don’t bother.” I knew what they all said.

Exactly what Alexander had told them to say.

Snarling, I turned from the pilot’s throne and the holograph well, crossed

the bridge in a swirling of black and white to gaze at the unfixed stars. The black expanse of all infinity stared back at me.

“Abba?”

I had two choices. I could stay the course. Flee. Turn my back upon the dominions of men, take my fight to the Cielcin, to the Watchers—alone and in secret, unhelped, unloved. An outlaw all my days . . .

Or I could stay. Risk everything—my people, my daughter, my very name—all for one last chance at victory.

“He’s lying,” I said to my reflection, to the reflections of those behind me. “They all know he’s lying, and he knows that *I* know that he is lying.” I pressed my forehead against the metallic glass.

“No response from *Aurora*,” said Orphan darkly.

Edouard hurried round the holography well toward me. “Hadrian, if we don’t reply to fleet—”

“They won’t dare attack us,” I said. “Alexander wants this ship in one piece. That, or for me to go.”

“Why are they doing this?” Cassandra asked.

“Because they know the Cielcin aren’t coming,” I said. “Ramanthanu, Otomno: Bring me Captain Soonchanged.” I rounded on Orphan. “Has there been any reply from *Mnemon*?”

“Nothing,” Orphan said.

I shut my eyes. Something was very terribly wrong. Olorin would not abandon me.

“We need more time!” I said, looking back at my companions. “Signal the fleet on all frequencies and telegraph *Aurora*.” My eyes settled on Cassandra, and I did my best to give her my most reassuring smile. It was not over. Not yet. “Tell them we surrender.”

CHAPTER 60

PROTEUS UNBOUND

TIME WAS AGAINST US, as time forever is. We had hours—Orphan estimated fewer than ten—before the Chantry and Alexander’s Martians could rendezvous with our location. Time enough? I could see the vessels on approach via the holograph, where they were visible as a cluster of polyhedrons.

I hardly looked at them. My attention was given over to satellite images of the planet itself. Our orbit had carried us over Catraeth, affording us a clear look at what Alexander had done.

The first bomb had struck the southwestern part of the city, right on the edge of the bluffs. Its impact left a crater, a nearly perfect hemisphere, a void where nothing was, where nothing remained. Not stone streets, nor the ruined hulks of buildings.

Nothing.

“Antimatter,” Edouard said, close at my shoulder. “They used antimatter.”

Wordlessly, I nodded. My mind was reeling, my eyes on the site of the second impact.

“*Mère de Dieu . . .*” Edouard said. “All those people . . .” He sketched his rune of protection over himself, touching forehead, breast, and shoulders in their turn.

“I know,” I said, hoping it would obtain his silence. I needed to think, needed to *see*.

The second strike had hit the camp, struck right at its heart.

How many millions had been there, crammed into tents and tenements beneath the plateau? Ten? Twenty? There had been more people in the camp than in the city, and the city had not been small.

“They hit the lazaret,” said Edouard, pointing.

Cassandra circled out from the reverse side of the image. I could see her spirit at the edges of her eyes, burning with pale fire and a fury beyond shock.

“I know,” I said again.

Fort Din itself remained unscathed—as if by accident—as did the airfield, the starport, the hightowers . . . all the strategic targets. That fact has been forgotten, erased by the fire that claimed that world entire. That fact alone should have proved my innocence, but my innocence was beyond demonstration, beyond fact. The *truth* was all that mattered, and the *truth* belonged to Alexander. It was his plaything, his pathic . . . clay in his hands. It did not matter what *was*. All that mattered was what was *believed*.

I bombed Catraeth. I killed those people, just as I had caused the riot, just as I had botched the evacuation effort, as I had brought an end to the Gododdin and all their world. How could I argue my innocence, when my guilt had been decided so long ago? When my guilt was the variable the algebra of empire had been constructed to resolve?

There was only one way.

I needed proof, and I needed to lay that proof before the feet of the Emperor himself.

The Emperor . . . and Jadd.

“Try *Mnemon* again,” I said.

Orphan’s eyes were closed, its brows furrowed.

One head shook, then the other.

“There is no reply.”

That wasn’t right. “Are our messages getting out?”

Edouard blinked. “You think we’re being jammed?”

“That is a thing impossible to know,” Orphan said.

“Open broadcast,” I said, turning to face the silverfish as they descended. “Olorin!” I composed myself, breathing as Gibson had taught me. “Olorin . . . listen. I did not do this thing. The bombs. The city . . . you know that I would not . . . would never . . .” I faltered. The prince knew full well that I intended to use *Astrophage*, that I had been prepared to

annihilate the entire system. He had seen me annihilate Eidyn. “It is the prince,” I said, “the Chantry. They want this ship.” Did I dare say more? If the call was being jammed, if it was being intercepted . . .

“Don’t trust them.”

I signaled an end to the transmission, shut my eyes.

That was how the Cielcin found me, Otomno and the lop-horned captain returning with Here Soonchanged, Captain of the *Azoth* between them. The thing that once had been Hereward of House Mot regarded me with the lenses in its base. I could see the apertures narrow, watched the doglike forelegs dip the bell jar that held his fetal form forward in a surprisingly graceful approximation of a bow. “Gentle lord,” he said. “You summoned me. I came.”

“I need your help,” I said.

“My help?” said Captain Soonchanged. “So many years of silence . . . sitting on my shelf—like a book you bought but barely opened. Now you need me?”

I let my cloak fall about my shoulders.

“We have a common enemy,” I said.

“Death,” the captain said. “Entropy.”

“Your former masters,” I said. “The Chantry have moved against me.”

Was it possible for the creature to experience surprise? Or was that one of things the late Father Hereward had traded away? The creature had not moved, stood poised on its short legs—a table with a vase stacked upon it. The body within—a bloated infant—hardly stirred. One small, fat hand drifted, disturbed by the xanthous liquid in which it swam.

“Why have you called for me?” he said at last. A high-pitched whine—as of feedback—sounded as the creature swiveled on its legs, taking in the bridge. “You have this ship, this instrument of vengeance. Destroy them, as you destroyed them at Vorgossos.” He scuttled forward on iron feet, peds clicking like the fingers of the *uthras*. “You do not need what I am.”

“I can’t destroy them,” I said, looking to Orphan, to Cassandra, to the Cielcin standing at the captain’s either hand, eyes darting like the silverfish. “It’s what they want. They know I won’t do it, but they have some plan in

place if I do . . .” Quickly, I told him all that had passed upon the surface: the long years of slow evacuation, the riots, the plague. How I had been made auctor, and boxed out of my authority.

“I need to do more than kill them,” I said finally, feeling the moments fall through my fingers like so much sand. “I need to hurt them. I need to know their plan. I need to know what they know—what they aren’t telling us.”

“And you think I know it?” said Here Soonchanged, deep voice void of human feeling, so that the question seemed a declaration. “Many thousand years stand now between us and that time when I was one of them.”

I took a step nearer, loomed over the creature. The thing stood no higher than my ribs. Its top showed the heavy mechanism that secured the lid of its container. I saw the locks. The handle. Instructions for opening stenciled in what appeared to be Classical English. “You told me you were great among them, then.”

“I was Master of the Sanctum at Alexandria, yes,” said he, and I felt a chill.

“You know what they are,” I said. “What they can do. You know what to look for.”

Soonchanged scuttled where he stood, looked from Ramanthanu to Otomno, almost nervous. “You wish for me to . . . attack the Chantry’s computers?”

“You told me once,” I said, “that this . . . form of yours . . . that you designed it to *become* like the machines of old . . .” Above us, the hideous mural that depicted the monstrous Brethren as it saw itself loomed, the image of the boy, Daniel, seated on Cheyenne’s massive shoulder. I found myself remembering the boy’s pod, the monster’s metal heart emerging from the monster’s body as its flesh split and tore.

“The transformation is not complete, and I am yet very small.”

The bounds of his jar stopped his growth, he had told me—that and the citrine fluid in which he swam. There were yet tests to perform, conditions to perfect.

“But you *can* interface with the datasphere?” I asked.

“What is there for me?” asked Here Soonchanged.

“Your life.” Cassandra had answered faster than I, and laid her hand atop the creature’s cylinder. Her fingers held her sword.

Soonchanged twisted all round without moving its feet, peered up into her face with its sensors. “You will not destroy me,” he said. “Not if I am to be your deliverance.”

“Then deliver,” said she, and tapped the priestling’s cap with her pommel.

“It is not so simple,” said the monster in its voice like hell. “You know nothing of our ways. Our means.”

“Illumine me,” I said. “They are coming here, now. I have given them my surrender to buy us time. How do you think they will treat you when they find you?”

The captain gave no sign, made no move but to allow bubbles to escape his malformed lips. The eyes, I saw, were swollen shut, the small, fat fingers webbed.

When enough time had passed without an answer, Cassandra shoved the creature’s chassis, forcing the metal dog legs to scramble. My two Cielcin circled, hands on swords. “What you want is impossible,” Here said.

“Bad answer,” I said.

“You have no notion what it is we might be up against,” said he. “The general intelligence you encountered at Vorgossos is of a lower order. There are others. More powerful by far.”

I turned from the tall windows. “You think there is a daimon here?”

What Soonchanged said next I have never forgotten. “There are daimons everywhere, gentle lord. What you call daimons. They are your wardens. Your gaolers. Your watchers and minders. You must know this! How do you think your Empire has survived so long in a galaxy so hostile to it? You think it is the strength of your legions?”

Your Watchers . . . The captain’s words were like tympany in my ears. I felt them in my chest, my heart. I thought I knew the truth, thought I’d grasped it, but the full scope of Soonchanged’s words stretched far beyond the revelations of Vorgossos. I had believed that the creature, Ship, had been

the great secret of the Terran Chantry, the great weapon of the *shadow kingdom* that groaned in the Empire's joints, but it was only a trifle. A child's toy.

"Even if I wanted to defy them for your sake, gentle lord, I cannot. I do not have the processing power! The substrate!"

At the word *power*, I looked to Orphan. The giant's faces both turned down in obvious concern.

"We have the power," I said.

"Master, no!"

"Father!"

Orphan lurched to its feet, trailing cords of braided glass.

I raised a hand to silence the beast, matched its advance until I stood level with Here Soonchanged. Still holding my hand aloft to stall the centimanus, I looked down at the bottled creature, and experienced a curious instant of unreality. There I was, upon the bridge of a great ship built by machine hands, ordered by machine wills, speaking to a man reborn in the body of his own child, horribly deformed, and a two-headed giant.

"Suppose you were to interface with this ship's computer," I said. "Could you do it then?"

"Vie with the Chantry?" asked Here Soonchanged. "Perhaps."

"You cannot!" Orphan said. "Master, this cannot be."

"Don't despair!" I said, glaring at Orphan with the full force of my eye. "That's what you said to me! Do you remember? Don't despair!"

The giant staggered forward, tearing leads from its head as it came. "You are offering control of this ship to this . . . creature!" it said.

"You know that!"

"On the contrary," I said, turning that raised hand into a finger thrust at Orphan's heart. "I want you to go with him."

Orphan stopped. "Me?"

"Who else?" I said. "This is what you were made for. To sail this ship." I skirted round Cassandra and Soonchanged as I spoke and, reaching up, laid a hand on Orphan's shoulder. The giant flinched. "I need you to sail it . . . a

little differently.” I returned my attention to Here Soonchanged, asking, “Can you do it?”

The creature scuttled round until it faced me properly. “Do what, *precisely?*”

“Strip them bare,” I said, imperious, “and drag everything they are into the light.”

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CHAPTER 61

DEUS ET MACHINA

“THIS THING YOU HOPE to achieve . . .” said Here Soonchanged, shifting where he stood on his four canine feet, “it may not even be possible.”

I looked past Cassandra and Edouard, looked to Orphan, who stood by the center console in its trailing cloak, hunched as if with pain. But it was Edouard who spoke, adjusting his spectacles so that they caught the light of the console. “They are almost certainly jamming us,” he said.

“A sufficiently strong signal should be enough to overcome that limitation,” said Here Soonchanged. “But it will be a violent act, and we are at a disadvantage. Propagation time between this ship and the fleet is an estimated one-point-three-seven-six seconds at last estimate. That is aeons in machine plane. If my script is not precisely laid, we may never gain access.”

The central monitor showed a series of two-dimensional impressions of Gododdin system, charting vectors for the various ships in orbit on their various planes. There was *Aurora*, and *Huntsman*, and *Tempest*—all the main battle groups. There the Jaddians, and the Durantines, the Mandari and Nipponese, the few remaining Tavrosi . . . all the lords of men.

And there were the Martians Alexander had sent after us, burning to catch us where our orbit carried us further and further away. “Where is the Chantry ship?” I asked.

Edouard stepped forward, reached over my shoulder with a finger. “There.”

“Once we are inside,” said Here Soonchanged, “I will work to establish a beachhead, to create an *avatar* of myself capable of local action. That will allow for rapid response to their countermeasures.” He looked to Orphan, preferring to shift his whole chassis rather than turn the turret that housed

his chrysalid flesh. “You will not be able to do so, however, and will suffer latency.”

Orphan’s faces looked to one another.

“What does he mean?” asked Cassandra.

“*He means,*” said Here Soonchanged pointedly, swiveling to peer at her with his full suite of sensory apparatus, “that he—I—will be able to duplicate my image, my *thoughtform*, in machine language within *Ararat*’s central computer. I can do this because I am myself part machine. But your . . . friends . . . here, will be forced to rely upon neural interface. They cannot duplicate themselves on the far end, and so will be subject to the gapped time it takes for a signal to propagate from *Demiurge* to *Ararat* and back again. They will only slow us down.”

Orphan bridled, baring its huge, square teeth.

“Peace!” I said, throwing up a hand to stop my monster. “Peace, Orphan!”

The giant relaxed only slowly. It knew full well its purpose. It was to guard against the captain’s seizure of *Demiurge*.

Edouard turned from the console to regard the Extrasolarian mutant. “You will yourself be subject to the same latency issues before you force their gateway.”

Soonchanged extended one of its segmented tentacles, pointed a clawed hand at the curtains of neural tissue that hung overhead, swaying in the gentle air from the ventilation shafts that pierced the dome above. “That is where your ship comes in. I need its processing power. With it, I will attempt as many permutations in parallel as possible, force their gateway, if I can. Their ability to repel my attack will depend on how well they can anticipate all possible attack vectors.”

“Can you do it?” I asked.

The creature paused in answering, camera lenses looking to Orphan, to Cassandra and Edouard, to the two Cielcin standing by the doors of the huge, hemispheric chamber, to myself. “If I do this,” he said, “you will guarantee my freedom?”

I opened one hand, palm up. “We have an accord.”

The turret rotated. The blind, bloated face of the chrysalid peered at me, flesh fully presented. Optics whined. “Do we?”

I looked to Cassandra. To Orphan. The giant shook its heads.

“Do this, and I will let you go.” I could feel the tension in the air. “But if you betray us—”

“I’ll kill you where you stand.” Cassandra shifted her weight, her posture, revealed the brass hilt half-hidden in her hand.

Soonchanged’s talons gripped each other. “I am at your service.”

“We have a little under nine hours,” Edouard said, looking at the Martian flight group. “What do you need from us?”

The captain of Vorgossos trotted forward on its iron peds, half circling the central column, where a set of arcane panels stood. “Only access,” he said, turning his sensory apparatus toward Orphan. “Permission.” He paused, only his claw arm extruded, still upraised. “What am I looking for?”

“Everything,” I said, circling after the Exalted captain. “I want every scrap of data on their system. Every grain of information. Every plot. Every secret. I want it all.” Turning to Soonchanged, I asked, “Can you do it?”

Four iron feet shifted where they stood, each rising delicately from the floor in sequence, though the jar stayed perfectly steady. “There are . . . doors, protocols I might take advantage of—”

“Can you *do* it?” I asked again, more forcefully.

“I can.”

“This is a mistake,” Orphan said. “I cannot work with this one.”

“We cannot work with this one!” The giant took one lurching step toward the dwarf, forced me to stand between them.

Prodding Orphan in its chest, I said, “We need this, Orphan. We need him.”

“Master—”

“Father!” Orphan stooped, lay its right hand upon the console. “He will take the ship from us!”

“You do not know what he can do!”

“What he is capable of!”

A hiss of frustration passed my teeth, and sparing a glance for Soonchanged, I said, "There is no other way."

"There is!" it said, black eyes narrowing.

Pale eyes wide. "We can fight them. We can destroy their ship. All their ships."

"No," I said, and lay a hand on the creature's chest, gently forced it back a step. "No. We can't." Ohannes Douro's shade peered over Orphan's shoulder, eyes black and bottomless pits. "It's what they want. They want me to give them a reason. They want war."

Cassandra spoke over Soonchanged's head. "Abba, they started a war! They bombed the city! Those people—"

"I know!" I said. "But if we shoot back—if *I* shoot back—I will prove their claim, do you see?" I left Orphan turned to face the others. "I'd be playing right into their hands . . ." I shook my head. "I should not have destroyed Eidyn." I had helped back myself into this corner. "But it isn't over. Not yet."

I felt every instant of my age then, as I had on Jadd, as if all the gifts Ragama and Ragama's lord had given me were stolen away.

"There must be proof," I said, voice scarcely more than a whisper. "There must be communications. Deployment orders. Requisitions. I need you to find them"—I directed these words to Captain Soonchanged—"and once you have them, I need you to broadcast them to every ship in this system. Do you understand?"

Two of Soonchanged's legs bent backward as he bowed, tipping his whole jar forward until I thought the hideous contents might spill.

"What do you need?" I asked.

• • •

There was but little Soonchanged required. Only a place at the console and a few hardline connections, leads socketed to ports about the monster's waist.

“If we’re being jammed,” Cassandra asked. “How is this supposed to work?”

“Tightbeam,” Edouard said. The microwave laser was capable of transmitting whole libraries of information at a single burst. In less than a second, Here Soonchanged had explained, he would be able to transmit a copy of his will—his thoughtform—to a receiver on the Chantry vessel. There, his image would unpack itself, opening like a flower on the Chantry’s datasphere.

“If we can push a signal with enough power,” Edouard said, “we can overcome their jamming.”

“Can’t they block us?” Cassandra asked. “Don’t they need an open receiver?”

“They won’t expect this sort of attack,” I said. “Not from me.”

And if they did expect it . . . I thought, then the battle is already lost. We would have no choice but to retaliate. We might take one of *Demiurge’s* frigates straight to *Ararat*, try to take the ship by force and so seize whatever information we could at the point of the sword.

But it would not come to that.

Orphan slouched back, seated itself in the chair that backed up against the console, cape parting to reveal the gnarled flesh beneath. “This is a mistake,” it said.

“This is not the path.” Still, one left hand extruded the electrode from the arm of the chair at its side, pressed the black patch to its head.

“You told me not to despair,” I said.

“You do not know what that beast is capable of,” said the black-haired head, jaw set.

“But I know what you’re capable of,” I said. “You’ll keep us safe.”

Edouard had crouched to assist Here Soonchanged with the various attachments required to bind him to the system. Soonchanged’s iron carapace had been made on Vorgossos, and so his systems were compatible with those of the ship. Iron claws and glass wires attached to the column in various places—more than a dozen connection points in all.

“Are you prepared?” I asked, looking from Orphan to Soonchanged and

back again.

“Yes,” said the captain.

“Yes,” said Orphan.

And, “Yes.”

I felt powerless. I was no sorcerer, despite all the whispers made against my name. I knew nothing of praxis, as Valka had said so many times.

I touched the phylactery at my throat, held it fast.

Another ghost spoke through me, and I said, “Then see it done.”

What happened then happened instantly, or seeming so. A little time passed. An instant. A breath. Orphan’s eyes drifted shut. Cassandra shifted where she stood. Edouard took a step toward the central console, hands behind his back. “Transmission commencing.”

There should have been . . . *something*. A flash of light. The crack of guns. The roar of storm or fire. But there was nothing, only the whitening of Orphan’s knuckles on the arms of the seat at the foot of that great column—a stiffening of posture, a clenching of jaws. Here Soonchanged changed not at all, floated in its tank, seeming dead, a specimen preserved by some Victorian maniac for his own perverse delectation.

A second passed.

A second. A breath.

A third.

Cassandra started to speak, bright voice rising toward a word that would never come.

The whole of that chamber went dark. All dark, but for the lights on Soonchanged’s chassis. On my wrist-terminal. On Edouard’s. A black foreboding filled my lungs like water, my heart like wine. Turning, I saw nothing, heard Ramanathanu—or was it Otomno—hiss, “*Deni raka oyade?*”

I could see only the shriveled goblin floating in its jar, its too-long fingers and too-large sex made more disturbing by the fact that it, alone, was still illuminated.

Then Cassandra drew her blade. Light blue and bright as day answered the goblin’s amber glow, cast pale highlights on our faces, on the column, on the living curtains above our heads.

“Hold!” I raised my hand, little understanding the sorcery that had just taken place.

Edouard’s hand was on his pistol—a useless gesture, if sincere. “What’s going on?” he asked, echoing the Cielcin question.

“We haven’t lost gravity,” I answered, looking from face to face. “Some systems are still operative.”

Edouard shook his head. “Suppression fields are tied direct to the fusion reactors. Those systems are analog.”

I did not answer, advanced on the seat at the base of the pillar. “Orphan?”

The creature’s faces both were twisted.

“Orphan?” I asked again.

The beast’s huge, right hand left the arm of its chair, six fingers spread, pleading for silence. I studied its faces, marked each line deep graven on cheeks and brows, the eyes shut or blankly staring.

“They cannot answer you,” came a basso black as the night.

I felt Cassandra redouble at the sound of that voice, and whirling caught her wrist.

“Let go, Abba!” Cassandra tugged against my grip. “It’s trying to take the ship.”

“You are nothing,” the voice said, issuing from Soonchanged’s chassis. “You are doomed.”

“Abba!”

Strong as she was, stronger than mortal men, stronger than the lords of Empire, she was not stronger than me. I did not look at her, but held fast, my hand on hers. “That’s not him,” I said.

“*Madha?*” she asked.

“That’s not Captain Soonchanged,” I said, certain I was right.

“What?” Edouard’s gun was in his hand.

“You’re a machine,” I said.

No answer came.

I caught myself remembering what Orphan had told me of the end, the fall of the Americans. *There was a war*, it had said. *One that lasted less than*

an instant. I'd imagined the machines like galaxies colliding, tearing one another into cascading ribbons of light. Stars like sparks—each a machine life form, a mind crafted by Felsenburgh or his daughters—blown out one by one.

Something like that had happened here.

Though an instant had passed—the barest moment—it had been as years. I shall not describe—for I cannot comprehend—the struggle that had passed between the captain, the pilot, and the enemy. Between us and the Chantry, between *Demiurge* and *Ararat*. But I knew that we had lost, or nearly so.

“Where is the captain?” I asked, rounding on the bottled dwarf.

“I am the captain,” came the bass reply.

“No,” I said, drawing near the iron chassis, “you’re not.”

“If you believe that,” said the voice of Here Soonchanged, “strike.”

I had to clamp my hand down over Cassandra’s even harder than before. “I said no!” I shouted. “It wants us to kill him.” I looked at Orphan, at the strain writ on both its faces. “They’re fighting.”

“Then we have to help!” she said.

“You’ll only kill the captain!” I said. “That’s what it wants!”

Edouard had raised his gun. “We can’t lose this ship!”

Behind the captain, Ramanthanu and Otomno both had drawn their blades. If the ship was lost . . . if it was taken . . .

. . . but we had no idea what had happened.

But Orphan had not lowered its hand. That huge, six-fingered hand still hung in the air.

“Not yet,” I said, looking sidelong at the centimanus. “Not yet.” I composed myself, and steadily—very steadily—I released Cassandra’s arm. The blade stayed down. Returning my attention fully to the creature in the tank, I said, “What are you, then? Man or machine?”

“I think,” it said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Name yourself.”

No answer.

“You think the Chantry’s taken possession of our friend here?” Edouard

asked.

“This was a mistake, Abba!”

Orphan’s hand was still in the air, as if abandoned by the wills that moved it. How much had happened, internally, in the minute or so since the lights had failed? How many simulations had Orphan and Soonchanged run? How many gambits had they made against the Chantry? Had the captain built his beachhead in the systems aboard *Ararat*? Was the war upon machine plane unfolding even then across two fronts? I hissed. “They might want us to kill him, or sever the connection. Maybe he’s winning.”

I felt rather like Pandora, praying her cat might live again when she opened her box.

Pandora had found only death when she opened the lid, little realizing the hope it had contained.

Hope.

Hope was a cloud, Gibson always said. Had it clouded me? My judgement? My sense? Or was that aphorism—like so much of the scholiasts’ stoic pose—so much dross?

Was hope all I had?

“There . . .” Orphan’s basso escaped its lips, veins bulging in either forehead, “. . . is . . .”

Its counterpart took up its thought, straining, “. . . another . . .”

“Another will,” the basso said. “Another power.”

The round face, the one with the gleaming hair, turned its glassy eyes on me. “D,” it said.

The English letter?

I looked at Soonchanged, quiescent in his tank. “Your name is . . . D?”

Another daimon. The Chantry had sent a daimon after us, used the link Soonchanged had established to infect the ship. But no—I looked at Orphan, at the cables snaking between Soonchanged’s chassis and the center console. The daimon was—for the moment, at least—trapped on board Soonchanged’s carriage, held there by Orphan . . . perhaps by the captain himself.

“Answer me!” I said.

“Marlowe!” the black voice of the machine rang out. “Marlowe! You have to kill me! The ship! It’s going to take the ship!”

Cassandra and Edouard both flinched, redoubled their postures. Ramanthanu bared its fangs.

“Captain?” asked Edouard.

“That’s not the captain,” I said. Hereward Mot had so lusted after life that he had rebirthed himself, reinvented his body as the chrysalid in the tank.

“Albé,” came the voice then, and the cameras focused on the agent, “Edouard Alain Galaad. Born seventeen two eighty-nine point zero-four point zero five. Delos. Auriga Province. Spur of Orion. St.-Maximilian Museum Catholic Reserve. Meidua Prefecture.” As it spoke, I could feel the temperature dropping around the HAPSIS man, see the muscles of his face turning fiber by fiber to stone. “You are in active rebellion against Earth and Empire. The crime is treason. The sentence death.”

A2 did not lower his gun. “Is that so?”

“Brother: Germain Nazaire. Sisters: Marie Hyacinthe. Léonne Sibylla. Vivienne Emanuelle—”

“Enough!” Edouard said, voice hard and brittle as ice.

I looked at him, his brows contracted, his eyes like glass.

“A telegraph has been transmitted to Delos,” said the thing in Here Soonchanged.

“Edouard!” I took a step toward him.

The younger man did not drop his gun. There were tears in the dark eyes, but he did not waver.

“Kill this creature,” said the daimon, “and your family will be spared.”

“Don’t!” Orphan’s castrato croaked, voice low as I had ever heard it.

“Cut the cords!” Cassandra said.

“Wait!” said Here Soonchanged. Or was it the daimon? Then: “Shoot! Break the glass!”

Edouard shut his eyes, then did the bravest thing I think I have ever seen. He opened his hand, let his gun hang from his thumb as he raised it above his head. “Their blood on your hands,” he said.

“So be it,” said Here Soonchanged.

But Cassandra pressed forward. My fingers seized the sleeve of her *mandyas*, right where her lost arm ought to be. The garment came free in my hand, magnetic ties parting as I pulled and she advanced. She darted forward, clad now only in her Marlowe blacks. The blue-white blade of Jadd rose, swept down and back in a crescent moon that slashed the cords that bound the captain to the column.

Every one.

“Anaryan!” I went after her, caught her arm and held her.

Too late. Too late.

Orphan sagged in its chair, brows both beaded with sweat, necklaces puddling on its bare thighs.

The lights came on again, filling the air with a faint thrumming, more felt than heard.

“What have you done?” the giant asked, black eyes glowering up at Cassandra.

And again, in its other voice, the high voice cracked with strain: “What have you done?”

“What you all should have done minutes ago,” Cassandra said.

“Fool!” Orphan staggered to its feet, tearing electrodes from either head with its two left hands. “You have doomed the captain!”

Cassandra looked at me as I let her go, eyes hard and glaring. Damage done. Seeing the look on my face, she softened, straightened. “No great loss,” she said, a coldness in her tone that shocked me.

“What happened?” I asked, looking to Orphan for answers. “What do we do?”

The giant lumbered forward, went to one knee beside the wreck of Here Soonchanged. Three hands ran over the machinery, fingers checking dials, thumbnail displays, moving frantically, but with a directed precision.

“Orphan!”

The creature stiffened, did not rise. “We have it.”

I froze, felt my heart leap into my mouth. “Have what?”

I dared hope then, felt its poison, bright and sharp as fear. “Orphan, what

do we have?”

One head turned to look at me, then the other. With Orphan kneeling, those faces were nearly level with my own, each huge and hideous, their skin mottled and sallow, their bones twisted and squashed. But their voices were sweet music as they answered me. A single word. “Everything.”

Victory.

I had to catch myself as I fell against the center console, feeling relief wash over me like the tide. The smile that split Cassandra’s face was like the sun. Even Edouard breathed a little easier, while the Cielcin watched in silence, fingering their blades.

“Everything?”

“The captain broke their encryption,” said Orphan’s black-haired head. “Took everything . . .”

“Oceans of data,” said the other, laying a hand on Soonchanged’s chassis. “In here.”

“Proof they bombed the city?” I asked.

Both heads nodded, and I shut my eyes. We had proof.

“Very good, Orphan. Can you extract the—”

Before I could say the word *data*, I heard a *snick*—as though a door had opened—followed by a faint, pneumatic *hiss*. The creature turned its head at the sound of my voice . . . and that alone had been its salvation. Orphan howled, clutched its cheek with its huge, right hand, fell wailing to the cold, metallic floor. I saw the *knife-missile* an instant later, blade slicing air. It had laid the side of Orphan’s face wide open—blood red as this ink spilling down its black-haired face. The golden coronet that decorated those raven locks fell with a clatter, rolled across the floor.

Had the creature not turned, it would have died, then—half died—with a knife buried in one black eye. The blade had emerged from a hidden compartment in the captain’s chassis—one that had somehow escaped decades of repeat inspection. I saw the blade slipping in the air, angling down at the fallen giant. Time stretched, shattered beneath the impact of my will. One knife became ten thousand. Ten million. Ten trillion.

My blade leaped into my hand, blazing like sunfire.

I swung.

Ten trillion blades collapsed, every miss vanishing—an infinity of failures snuffed from potential by my hand. Highmatter met steel.

Steel failed. The knife-missile fell in two pieces, and I stood over the centimanus like one of God’s own angels, triumphant.

But it was only the beginning.

Precisely how old Father Hereward was I never learned, nor guessed in what black aeon he had constructed his iron mother and been reborn, nor how long he had labored in crafting the shell that served him both as prison and egg—but he had built it well. The knives that had escaped our detection—the knives he had never used against me, not once in all our talks, in all his imprisonment—had been concealed in the platform upon which the jar was perched, their design carefully crafted to mimic the plates of a capacitor.

I drew my cloak across myself, felt the impact as one struck me in the ribs. It failed to penetrate the nanocarbon armorweave beneath the Imperial samite, accorded me time to thumb my shield. Orphan was writhing on the floor, clutching its wounded face. The pilot was still certainly the daimon’s greatest target, and I whirled, scanning the air for the glimmer of knives. Already I saw a pair of *uthras* scurrying, clambering up the stanchions that supported the hanging membranes of the ship’s computer. They would never aid us in time.

There!

I saw the flash of steel, lunged. Another blade fell dead.

“Shields!” I shouted, ribs aching from the blunt force of the impact that might have stopped my heart.

Too late.

The air was filled with a sound like the boil of serpents. There must have been a dozen of the deadly things. More. The will that drove them said no word, offered no quarter. What could we do?

“Cassandra!”

She twisted at the sound, the sword of Jadd flaring as she turned and struck one of the dread things down. Our eyes met.

“Protect Orphan!” I called, saw three of the knives circling, moving as if in orbit about the chamber, each maintaining its distance from each while below, Ramanthanu batted one of the hateful things aside. There were too many, simply too many for Cassandra, and myself, and our swords.

I took a step. Another. I started running. Not left or right, nor toward the central column, nor away. I ran in every direction at once, as I had in the fight against Nebet Hut and her men. My vision blurred, brain struggling to comprehend my altered relationship with *the real*, eyes struggling to see the chamber from every place, every position, every point I might have occupied. I saw the knives—each a blur, a spasm of startling possibilities, smeared across the world. I had only to reach them. To be in the right place at the right time . . .

. . . every time.

I raised my sword, or extended my arm, or drew it back, or lunged. I thought of the statue of Fate in the Grand Sanctum of the Eternal City, her three faces, her many arms, the golden thread and needle passed between them. I had become Fate: many-armed, many-handed, like the icons of Lord Shiva I had seen in the temples of Nagamma when I was very young. I stood in many places at once.

Our eyes met across time. Hadrian’s and Hadrian’s. Our swords flashed, fell.

The weapons of the enemy fell with them.

Almost every one.

“No!”

Hadrian and Hadrian and Hadrian turned their faces, saw Cassandra hurl herself in front of the knife the daimon had hurled at the unshielded Edouard, arm thrown wide.

“No!”

But she *was* shielded, and the knife struck her back with enough force to be turned aside. I collapsed, crashing down from my higher space to mere reality, the blurred world sharpening, giving way to pain. The knife tumbled through the air, disturbed to have met with such resistance. I saw Cassandra

turn, her eyes green as emeralds, wide as pools. But before I could turn, before I could cut the knife from the air, *something* fell atop it.

An iron hand, no larger than a child's. Black fingers closed about the blade, crushing it to splinters. It was one of the *uthras*. More of its brethren landed on the floor about us, dropping from the stanchions above, more than one of them wrestling with a blade I had not stopped. The rest encircled Here Soonchanged—what *remained* of Here Soonchanged. Once, the captain's chassis had boasted a number of high-powered energy weapons. Masers, mostly, and one high-capacity needler of the sort Lorian had come to carry. These we had taken from him on his detainment, leaving him—we had thought—with nothing.

The daimon had not even moved.

"Surrender!" I said.

Edouard had knelt beside the fallen Orphan, was trying to calm the monstrous beast.

The *uthras* drew ever closer, started their way up the captain's four metal legs. One of those legs gave out, tumbled away, detached by the careful action of those grasping iron hands. Still more caught the falling beast, prevented the chrysalid's container from toppling.

I drew nearer the creature as the *uthras* brought it down, like an ox swarmed by locusts. The machines parted to permit my advance. Chest heaving, visioned blurred—from pain and not by power—I stood over the bottled fiend.

"Daimon!" I said, still holding my blazing sword. "You are beaten. We have you."

Cassandra had severed the hardlines that connected Soonchanged's chassis to the ship's computers. The Exalted captain's metal carapace had no transmitter powerful enough to broadcast off *Demiurge*. There was nowhere for the daimon to go.

"We trapped it?" Edouard asked, still kneeling over Orphan.

"What about the Extra?" Cassandra asked.

"Dead!" said Orphan.

"Brain-dead!" said the other, one left hand pressed to its bloody cheek.

“The fool was not prepared!”

Edouard helped the giant to sit up, hands on its too-broad shoulders. He looked to Cassandra, smiled, said, “Thank you.”

She only nodded.

“What happened?” asked Ramanthanu. “The sorcerer . . . it is dead?”

I turned back to the machine, the eidolon that had killed Hereward—in mind if not in body. “D?”

No answer.

“Can you hear me?”

“It is dead,” said the bleeding Orphan, not taking its hand from its face.

“Gone,” said the other head.

“Deleted.”

Cassandra’s voice was oily with doubt. “It killed itself?”

“It was only an image,” said Orphan. “A copy. One generated for this attack.”

“What happened?” I asked, echoing Ramanthanu.

“We need to get medical in here,” Edouard said. “He’s wounded.”

Orphan interjected, raised its two other hands to forestall the adorator. “No need,” it said. As it spoke, one of the *uthras* clambered over its shoulder and made its way up to the giant’s wounded face—the matted, black-haired face, the face on its right side. The gash had cut the left cheek, cut the tip off the left ear—I saw its lack as the beast took its hand away, permitted the *uthra* to begin its ministrations.

“They have a daimon,” said the other face.

“Like the last one?” I asked.

“Not like the last one,” said Orphan, wincing. The *uthra* busied itself with the administration of some concealed atomizer. Orphan held out its bloody hand, and another of the dreadful machines clambered down its arm and began cleaning the blood away. Still then as stone but for the whimpering of the one head, Orphan continued: “The last was a slave. This one . . . this one is a *god*.”

The giant’s ominous pronouncement hung in the air.

“Orphan,” I said, drawing the pale head’s gaze. “You have to tell us

what happened in there.”

The giant shook the little robot from its arm, drew the limb back beneath the shelter of its cloak. “They are not jamming our comms,” it said flatly. “They do not have to.”

“Speak plainly, mutant!” Cassandra snapped.

Orphan twitched, grasped the *uthra* on its face with one hand, and hurled it across the room. Already the bleeding had stopped, leaving the creature with an angry red mark and half an ear. “They have access to every comm and transmitter in the system, even the telegraphs.”

“Even ours?”

“No,” it said, and reached up with one left hand to touch the scarred right face, and turned to regard its counterpart with concern. “We are secure. I was able to prevent a full-scale invasion of our systems. But it knows *everything*. Sees everything. Controls . . . everything.”

Edouard asked, “Controls?”

“There is nothing that passes in this system they have not tampered with!” Orphan answered. “Every message! Every call! Every telegraph!”

“Shadows on the wall . . .” said the beast’s other head. “Only shadows.”

“Chinese whispers,” said the white-haired monster, muttering in English of all things.

I watched Cassandra’s brows knit.

“That . . . thing,” I said, drawing nearer the seated titan, “has control of the datasphere?”

What was I saying? Of course it did.

“Why?”

Both of Orphan’s faces found mine as, for a moment, it was heedless of the crawling iron hands that clung to its legs and shoulders.

“To keep you in the dark,” said one.

And the other: “To close the killing jar.”

“I said *speak plain!*” Cassandra stomped one foot with a force that terrified.

Orphan wrung its hands, all three of them together. It knew something, something it did not wish to say. There was pain in those twin faces, fear in

each set of eyes. One set closed, the other averted its gaze, and it spoke words to change the universe, to change man's destiny forever:

"The Eternal City is fallen," it said.

Five words. Five little words. How much they contained! Concealed.

Strange that I cannot now remember which face it was that uttered them. I cannot recall the voice, as though the meaning of those words trickled directly into my brain.

"What?" Edouard advanced, face pale in the dim light. "How? . . . When?"

"Two years ago," Orphan answered, one face turned to Edouard, the other locked on mine.

"Dorayaica," I said. "It split its forces."

The giant nodded.

The skies of Forum were black with unexpected flame. The white towers and sky isles of the City Eternal were fallen, the billowing sail walls and flying causeways torn down. I saw them toppled, the bottomless towers of that city of kings—had seen them toppled ten thousand times in my dreams. I had seen Dorayaica itself, standing on the steps of the Sun King's Palace, Vati Inamna at its side, the two of them standing hand in hand while the princes of the sun were flayed, raped, hanged in the square below.

Always I had thought to be there. To witness that ending—if it came.

It had come and gone without my knowledge.

"The Emperor doesn't know," I said, and felt a tear fall. Such a little thing: A dram of water. A grain of salt. A receipt for the deaths of billions.

The city had stood for thousands of years, for longer than man's recorded history on Earth. It had been built to stand forever. But it was ended, the lie given to its name at last.

The Eternal City, indeed.

"The Emperor doesn't know?" I said again, making it a question.

"They have concealed this thing," Orphan said.

"The Prince Regent," it added, speaking almost over itself. "The priests."

"Why?" Edouard's voice was brittle.

The answer was obvious. “Power.”

Edouard and Cassandra looked at me. I swallowed, began, “If the city is fallen . . .” I could hardly believe the words I said. “*If* the city is fallen, then what remains of the court here is *all*.” I curled both hands into fists, held them before myself like a boxer. I felt sick. “The end of the world, and they’re playing politics . . .”

“*Qesta jitaten ritardas! Qesta qirdahen koutsanas!*”

I lay a hand on Cassandra’s shoulder to stop her curses. “That’s why they want this ship,” I said. “They think I will take the throne.”

“You should take it!” Cassandra said, glaring, her green eyes white with reflected light. “These *koutsanas*! They should be on their knees! They should—”

“Cassandra!” I flashed her a glare. “I will not take the throne, not if it were the last chair in creation, do you understand? My seat is higher.” I thrust a finger at the dome above, at the space above spaces. “My duty is higher. Greater! I am not commanded to rule over mankind, but to save her!” I let my hands fall to my sides. “I thought I was meant to save her from the Cielcin, but I must first save her from herself, it seems . . .”

Orphan was still seated on the cold metal floor, its too-long legs crossed, hands on knees.

“You can prove all this?” I asked it.

The beast nodded, its heads out of sync. Its right hand, six-fingered as a Cielcin’s, indicated the ruin of Here Soonchanged. “He took all he could. Their data. Their knowledge.”

“It is in him. His memory.”

“You said he was brain-dead,” said Edouard.

“The organism is dead in spirit,” came the mutant’s reply. “Dead in will.”

“But the machine lives,” it said, indicating the implants that conjoined the undead chrysalid’s brain and spine.

The *uthras* maneuvered out of the way as I approached. I lay a hand against the lid of Hereward’s casket, the jar in which it had endured for

centuries. Touching it, I felt a spasm of pity for the fool captain. “You’re sure the daimon did not destroy the contents?”

“Our plan was to sequester the daimon in the captain’s chair,” Orphan said, standing at last. “He built—”

“There is a world in there,” said the black-headed one. “An unfinished universe. He meant to trap the daimon in it, if it sent its thoughtform after us. He succeeded.”

“But he did not count on the damage the entity was capable of from that vantage point,” said Orphan.

“He believed himself invincible.”

Not taking my hand from the casket, I asked, “Everything is on his implants? What they did to Catraeth? What happened to Forum? The cover-up?”

“And more,” Orphan said.

“What are we going to do?” Cassandra asked.

“We have to get this to the Emperor,” I said.

“But how?” she asked.

Edouard took a step forward. “They’ll shoot anything that leaves the ship, and if that . . . thing is controlling the network—”

“No communications can get out,” said Orphan.

“You could take one of the shuttles,” said Cassandra. “You could warp.”

The distance was short enough—a few light-seconds—that the amount of radiation collected by the warp envelope might not be enough to harm the crew aboard *Aurora*. Still, to emerge so close to the Imperial flagship . . . it would seem an act of war. Captain Rice and the Martians would destroy me.

I could only shake my head. “No.”

“It’s over then,” Edouard said. “All this . . .”

I could see the fear in his face, the memory of D’s threat.

All was silent then, but for the skittering of the *uthras* underfoot, the far-off hum of the ventilators. I had been about to reply, but the words froze on my lips. There was blood on the floor. That was not remarkable in itself. Orphan had bled profusely, and the remnants of its thrashing smeared the

dark metal. But the spot that had caught my eye was just that: a spot, as of a droplet falling. There was another! And another!

A constellation of blood.

I looked up. The little machines were climbing again, moving along the computer's membranes. Light shone through them, translucent as ever, save where it shone more brightly through the holes the knife-missiles had made.

A ragged breath escaped me.

Cassandra cursed so foully then she might have blackened the ears of Pallino himself.

D had slashed the computer.

Orphan howled and, stooping, seized one of Soonchanged's disconnected legs, hammered it against the floor until it broke at the knee. Even the Cielcin drew back, eyes wide and black as hell. Three hands went to two faces, and the giant sank to its knees. "Again?"

"Again?" One head regarded the other. "We are crippled."

"Hobbled."

I could not take my eyes from the bloody curtains. "Can you repair it?"

"The flesh will knit in days," said Orphan, deep voice tight with pain.

"There will be scarring."

"Damage."

"Healing will take time," said the castrato.

Cassandra advanced, hand on hip. Her eyes were turned upward, watching the blood runnel along the underside of the matrices. "How much time?" Beside her, Edouard crossed himself, took off his spectacles, the better to see.

"Years," said Orphan.

"Years."

"We don't have that long," said young Albé.

"No," I agreed. "We don't."

Whatever our response, *Demiurge* would not be a part of it. The ship still possessed its critical systems. Its engines, its life support, its shields. The weapon systems still functioned, but with the computer so maimed, it

might prove necessary for any number of those systems to be operated manually.

To be manned.

“What are we going to do?” Cassandra asked.

“Nothing,” I said, looking at her. Seeing her confusion, I tried again.

“You are going to do nothing.”

“And you?” asked Edouard.

I knew the way. Knew what I must do.

Dorayaica had shown me the way.

“Orphan,” I said, “can you detach Captain Soonchanged’s casket from its platform?”

The giant looked at me, eyes narrow. “Yes,” it said.

“Of course.”

“Very good,” I said. “Edouard, bring me a bag.”

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CHAPTER 62

INTO THE ABYSS

“YOU’RE SURE YOU CAN do this?” Cassandra asked.

“I did it on Danu,” I said, shoving my right hand into the gauntlet presented to me by the casket that held my armor. The articulated plates of the gauntlet and manica proceeded up my arm, bonding as it went to the magnetic anchor points in the underlayment before attaching itself, at last, to my breastplate at the shoulder. The segmented pauldron extended overtop, completing the process.

“That was different,” she said, glancing at the door. “Dorayaica was there.”

I didn’t answer her at once. I was staring at the heavy black canvas bag that housed the brain-dead would-be god. No new universe for him, no cosmos of inner light, no subcreation, no eternal life floating in an endless sea. All that was left to him was data storage: a living body of proof.

“Abba?”

I shook myself, found that I’d been staring at the bag a long time.

I did my best to smile. “Your grandfather”—I never called him that, Lord Alistair was forever *my father*—“your grandfather wanted me to join the priesthood, you know? That’s why I left home, why I ran away.” I gestured at the dwarf dead in his jar. “I was just thinking . . . had things been different . . . it might be me in there.”

My daughter shook her head. “You’d never do that to yourself.”

“Am I so different?” I asked, extending one hand, palm up, to indicate my transfigured self.

“Yes,” she said, face intent. “What you have is a gift. He did that to himself.” I felt my smile falter as she said, “If I wanted my arm back, I could have it—”

“Anaryan, I—”

“But it wouldn’t be my arm. Only the Absolute can give me back *my* arm,” she said. “Like he gave you back to me.”

“Cassandra—”

“You know that,” she said, and faced me squarely. “I know that.” She looked down at the satchel that held the undead monster. “You’re nothing like him.”

I put a hand on her shoulder, drew her in, embraced her. “Thank you,” I said. But she was wrong. Hereward Mot had been born in darkness, to pagan priests in a world far fallen into evil. I imagined the boy growing up in the shadows of the Mericanii pyramids, thought of the girl his father had captured for him to hunt in the gardens on the Aventine Hill. Picturing the boy’s father, it was my own father I saw, and the devil of our house.

I, too, had been born in darkness, had only been called to the light. All my life, I had struggled to escape that sigil, that wretched banner. I had been born a devil—as are we all, incontinent, simian things that we are—but I had shed my horns, had become something else entirely.

Pity came at last—born of precisely that kinship Cassandra had denied. I extricated myself from her embrace. “If I don’t come back,” I said, “if this goes wrong . . . you get everyone off this ship, you understand? Orphan says it cannot make the jump to warp with the computer slashed, so you have to save our people. The Danuans especially. The Chantry will experiment on them. You take them and you run, do you understand?”

“Abba—”

“Do you understand?” I took her shoulders in either hand, peered down into her face. “Go to Jadd if you can—if Olorin is not now against us—or go into hiding. Leave the galaxy if you have to. Run away. Never stop running.”

“But Abba, the Pale!”

“They’re the Empire’s problem,” I said. “They deserve each other.” I drew back and, turning, knelt to lift the sack onto one shoulder. The dwarf’s casket was titanium and aluminum glass, not heavy at all. “You must not let this ship fall into their hands. Promise me, Anaryan.”

Cassandra swallowed, nodded. “Yes, Abba.”

“Good,” I said. “Now come.”

• • •

The tower stood high above the surface of the behemoth, extending perpendicular to the axis of thrust, so that—looking out from its high, narrow windows—one might see the length of the vessel where it stretched for miles. The place was nearly so far from the heart of *Demiurge* as it was possible to be, more than two miles above the outer hull. I needed it to be, needed to be as far from the confused geometry of the vessel as possible, lest I be trapped myself within.

“My prince,” said Ramanthanu, “let us go with you.”

“I’m not sure you can,” I said, looking from the lop-horned captain, to Otomno, to Annaz, to Edouard, and Cassandra. I was not certain I could do it, either. When I had used my power in the computer core, I had been confined to a single room, just as I had been confined to a single street during the Catraeth riots the day of Selene’s donation. On Danu, I had followed the path Dorayaica-Miudanar had made, a corridor in space, *above* space.

Here, I would forge my own road.

I turned to the other Delian, my countryman, and laying my hand on his shoulder, I looked to Cassandra, and said, “Keep an eye on her, will you? For me?”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” she said, speaking first.

“I never doubted that,” I said, and punched my chest. My helmet opened, unfurling from the flange about my neck. I’d tugged the coif into place already, and knew a moment of darkness as the helm ratcheted closed about my head. Then the world blossomed to new light, and I saw once more the faces of my people. My family. My friends. I felt I should say something—if it really was farewell.

No words came, and I shrugged the corpse of the Exalted captain over

my shoulder, lingered there a moment, looking back at the others. The chamber was a nowhere place, one of the many empty places contrived by the artificial intelligence that had designed that Escherian vessel: a round chamber, glass-walled, without furniture or function, accessed only by a spiral stair that curled down to a lift lobby a hundred feet below.

“What comes next?” asked Edouard. “How does it work?”

I held out a hand, palm parallel to the floor. “Our world is . . . like the surface of the sea.” I looked to Cassandra, smiled through my mask. “There are depths, places man cannot move—not normally.”

“But you can?” Edouard said.

I nodded. “That is how I do what I do. The Absolute, he . . . changed me.”

“You’re talking about other dimensions,” said Edouard. “Hyperspace?”

Again, I nodded. “On Danu, when Dorayaica appeared before us, it came from Dharan-Tun. Directly from Dharan-Tun. It didn’t pass through the space between. As we fought, I did the same. I *went* there, for just a moment. I was *on* Dharan-Tun.” Edouard’s face was very pale.

“You will walk to this other ship?” asked Ramanthanu, towering at the rear. “Through the land of the gods?”

I bent my head—a Cielcin display of dominance. “I will.”

“*Yaiya toh*,” the Pale said, and its mate with it, their eyes all wide with belief.

“*Yaiya toh*.”

“Hyperspace . . .” Edouard was shaking his head. “There are theories . . . but no proof it’s real.”

I laid a hand on his shoulder. “I am the proof,” I said, and looked out the window. It should prove a small matter of stepping from one place to the next, as easy as stepping from one boat bobbing at anchor to the next. But I had never done it before, not precisely, not on my own.

Do not let me fail, I thought, and screwed shut my eyes.

One wrong step, and I would be alone in the black of space, hurtling round Gododdin.

I was afraid. Not of what I was about to do, not of the ocean beyond

time, but of what would happen if I failed.

“Stand back,” I said. “All of you.”

They drew back.

I raised my hand, held it there—as if for balance, as if in farewell.

What I must have looked like to their eyes then I don’t dare imagine. Perhaps I blurred, appeared to twin, to refract as the body of poor Doctor Mann had lain refracted across three beds in the morgue at Phanamhara. I turned my head, peered then neither left nor right, but *out*, out across the infinite space of time. I saw myself peering back at me. If you have ever stood between two mirrors, you will know something of what I experienced then: the endless procession, the countless faces peering back, iterations rolling out to infinity in all directions.

Do not let me fail.

Then I felt it, as if in answer: the rocking of the deck beneath my feet, heaving as if tossed on some gentle but enormous tide.

Often as a boy, the castle servants would escort Crispin and myself down to the beaches that lay at the foot of our acropolis, where under the watchful eyes of father’s guards we would play in the surf. I would stand for minutes at a time, marveling at the enormity of the waters. Each wave that broke about my ankles—about my knees—brought with it a sense of dislocation, of vertigo, of the loss of control. The sea, the world, the cosmos, was so vast—unfathomable—and I was very, very small.

I felt that sense again there, then, felt the time-tide breaking about my feet where it rushed and ebbed. My feet were sinking, as if in deep sand, and looking down I saw that they had passed full through the black metal of the deck.

“Abba!” Cassandra lurched forward, and I turned, throwing up my hand.

I had found the waters of time. Their currents already pulled at me, beckoning me down, out, forward. The higher world awaited, deeper and darker and further in.

Cassandra snatched at my hand, but her fingers passed clean through my own as though I were mist. I saw shock in her face, and terror, and smiled.

“I love you,” I said.

The great ocean of time—of the space *beyond* time—rose like a wave before me, its unseen current hardly to be felt by we creatures of flesh and blood. I had only to cast myself upon the surf, to hurl myself into that sea. To do that, I had only to lift my foot . . . and take one single step.

I took that step, felt my stomach lurch as I hurtled into that limitless dark.

The ship about me: That tower room. The faces of my companions. Of my daughter. The view of Gododdin out the high windows . . . All vanished in an instant. I felt—truly felt—as though I had been plunged into deep water, and looking back—in the direction I thought of as *up*—I saw a confusion of shapes: black towers and spires, blazing windows, arched colonnades, heavy cannons, the colossal forms of men and women striving, gods and monsters.

The *Demiurge*.

And yet it was not the *Demiurge* I knew, not *Demiurge* as I had ever seen it. My passage into the higher world had flattened it, opened and unfurled it, so that it was like an image of itself. As I drifted further and further from it, it shifted, changing like the images in a kaleidoscope. One moment I saw clean through it, the next I saw nothing but black. When I glimpsed it again a moment later, it had changed completely, so that the tower where my daughter still stood was lost.

Then it was gone, obscured from me by so short a distance, and I understood why even the Watchers struggled to find it, so cunningly had it been concealed.

I was falling. The light of my universe fell past me in golden beams, in rays like the rays of search lamps. I could not go back. Could not swim. Looking down, I saw only infinite blackness, and knew that blackness for what it was: the Howling Dark.

Something was wrong. When I had chased Dorayaica into this realm before, my feet had always been planted on the ground. I had trodden secret ways between the stars—followed paths until I came to stand before the Prophet's throne. But there was nowhere to stand, nowhere to go, and though I strained toward the light, I could never reach it. I was sinking,

falling into darkness, as though the black hands of some long dead star had me in their grip. I could see . . . *everything*, the whole of creation open above my head. There was Gododdin, and the Emperor's ship. I could see it shrinking, curling, coiling away.

I had failed. Miscalculated. Misunderstood.

I would die in the dark. Or was I dead already? I looked down, down into the blackness. Would I awaken once more in the Well of Nahaman at the end of time? Find Ragama waiting for me?

Not like this . . . I thought. *Not here . . .*

The Martians would take *Demiurge*. Alexander would take the throne. The Chantry would take power again. And William would never even know. My men would be frozen forever or shot. My Cielcin would be butchered. My Irchtani abandoned and betrayed. The Danuans would be put under the microscope. Edouard would be hanged for a traitor, and Cassandra?

Cassandra would be put to the sword.

One hand still holding the strap that bound Soonchanged's corpse to myself, I strained with the other, flailed my legs—as if swimming—seeking some ledge, some surface to push against or stand upon.

There was nothing.

I failed, I thought. *Daughter, forgive me.*

Would I see Valka again? Would I sink so far into that ultimate dark that I reached the gray country she had found? Was it even the same darkness?

I was a fool to think that I could do it. That I could walk *outside*.

What was it Ramanthanu had called it, right before I'd left?

The land of the gods.

"Help me," I said, willing the Absolute to hear. "Help me, please."

I opened eyes. No help came. No word nor sign.

I screamed, howled at the night, hurled curses like stones. Still I sank. The light of my universe was far away, seemed little more than stars, infinitely remote. I thought of Icarus, his wings turned to ashes. *I should never have come here*. The sea of night stretched all about me, that darkness beyond time.

But I would not despair. My fury prevented me, and my faith.

“You will not let me die,” I said, thinking of the mountain on Annica, where he had conjured air to save me. There was a way out. There was always a way out. Ensuring that the bag which held Soonchanged’s braindead form was secure, I placed my hands on my helmet, ready to break the seal.

A hand closed upon my wrist, and I started, looked round.

If you have ever hung in an airlock, and felt the abrupt return of gravity, you will know something of how I felt then. The weightless sense of freefall vanished as I turned my head. There was ground beneath my feet, unseen but felt.

And there he was.

There *I* was.

His hand was like fire on my wrist. He wore no helmet, and his streaming hair floated about his face, black as the night about us both. His face was the face the Absolute had given me: perfected, made straight—but his armor was not the same. A pattern of wings decorated arms and breastplate, black as anything, but seemed to glow with a light of its own.

His eyes were green.

He raised a hand, pointed at the lights forever far above.

“I can’t,” I said. “I don’t know how.”

His hand did not fall.

“You’re not . . . you’re not me, are you?” I pulled my hand away.

The other stood there, facing me. I drew back, one hand still on the strap that held the captain’s body to my own. At once I felt myself begin to sink.

“What are you?” My other hand was on my sword.

As if in answer, a fire blossomed in the deep, and both the other and I turned our eyes to see it. I felt at once that sensation of eyes, felt the hairs on my neck rise.

The Watchers had found me. I saw their xanthous eyes—numberless as the stars—opening one by one in the night. And I saw *them*, then, as they truly were, as the Quiet had shown them to be in my vision on the mountaintop. Not beautiful, but terrible, terrible and great. I saw wings vast as continents, claws to shatter worlds.

The other seized my hand again, dragged me along after him. The unseen ground beneath our feet was hard as stone, and though we ran over level ground, it seemed to me the lights were drawing nearer. We were rising. I could see our universe again, all of it compressed to a view my eye could enjoy. I saw stars beyond counting, and worlds, and peoples. The all of it rose before us like a wave, a curtain of light. We were rushing along it, taking light-years at a stride.

“Why do you run?”

We were a few dozen strides from the light when the voice overtook us—high and cold and terribly familiar.

Sha lā puqqum.

Raka vaayu ti-taadyr.

“It is hopeless!” said the Prince of Princes.

I turned at last to face it, letting go of the other’s hand. At once I felt myself begin to sink, but the other laid a hand upon my shoulder.

There it stood, what remained of its body like a monument of unmortared stone, its face a craggy ruin held together by malice and pure will. Its black armor glittered in the light of our cosmos, its black toga—azure-fringed—floated in a wind that was not there.

“Why do you fight?” asked Syriani Dorayaica. “Your Eternal City burns! What hope have you of victory?”

It was true, then . . . I turned my face away, tucked my chin to hide my anguish. It occurred to me in that moment that the gesture was a threat among the Pale, and I stayed that way a long moment. The hand that held the strap that secured Here Soonchanged’s corpse tightened. I could not fight so encumbered, nor did I dare cast his ruin aside for fear that it would be lost forever, swept away by the unseen tides of hyperspace.

“There is nothing left!”

I shut my eyes, saw once more that shining city, her towers of marble and of gold rising, falling for miles into the clouds. Well I recalled the gilded domes, the white banners flying in the sun! I felt the wind once more through the trees of the Royal Wood, and stood with Selene before the Arch of Titus. No more would the Galath Tree bloom in the court before the

Peronine Palace, never again would the clangor of steel ring in the Grand Colosseum, or the smoke of sacrifice rise through the oculus of the Great Sanctum of Mother Earth, the Jewel of Heaven.

It was gone. All of it.

Gone . . .

“It is thanks to you!” said the Prophet. “When you told me of the Emperor’s whereabouts, I reasoned that the bulk of your armada lay with *him*. Man’s Empire is ended!”

“That may be,” I said, though I did not believe it, “but *man* is not! Did I not tell you: You will never break us. Not all of us.”

Syriani’s face cracked as it smiled, chips of stone flaking off like old paint. “I have cut out your heart!”

I beat my breast in answer. “My heart is here!” I said. “Right here!” I beat my breast again, conscious of the other like a shadow on my back. “You know where I am, *kinsman*! Come and face me! Let us see whose god is greater—yours or mine!”

The monster’s smile widened. Its face splintered, flecks of flesh like stone falling like tears.

Mahārka?

Adoian am?

Adiqa o-okarin ne?

“Face you?” Dorayaica raised its right hand, the white hand Miudanar had given it, and touched its cracking face. Its eyes—all three of them—stared past me at the light rising from our spacetime to that higher plane. “You have gathered all your strength—the greatest part of what remains . . . for what?”

I did not answer it.

A little breath escaped the Cielcin, and it covered its shattered face with one jeweled hand. “Of course . . . you meant to attack us. But you were too late. By the time you gathered your strength, we were gone . . .” Dorayaica peered at me with one black eye. “You knew we were refueling. How?”

It didn’t know.

All that power. That insight. That foresight . . . and it didn’t know.

Sagara's secret was safe.

"The magi . . ." it said, meaning the Minoan sorcerers. "The magi are to blame. They told you, didn't they?"

A light emanated from behind Dorayaica then, like the green flash of sunrise—and there she was, naked as the dawn, tall as towers: terrible, beautiful, unfathomably old. Ushara had come, and laid her hand upon the Prophet's shoulder, her hair a gauzy shade.

The hand upon my own shoulder tugged, intent. I turned to look at him, remembered where I was—what I was there to do. Let the old monster think the Minoans had betrayed him. It was better that way.

"I should have killed them long ago," Dorayaica said. "They have done their work already." It turned its shattered face to look upon Ushara, who looked at it with burning eyes. The Prophet reached up with its right hand—the hand Miudanar had given it, the hand of Miudanar itself—and laid that hand upon her breast. "They brought you to me, did they not?"

I turned my face away, felt a lurch as the other tugged on my shoulder. I could sense his urgency, but no fear. When I hesitated, he pointed past me, over my shoulder, back in the direction of the Prophet and its gods.

Others were coming, shapes huge and hideous, or beautiful beyond description. Giants. Horrors. Creatures of the night. I saw their countless hands. Their wings like continents. Their faces like the bronze masks of the dead. I saw one like a man riding a camel, another like a lion with a man's head gold crowned, another like a two-headed dragon, each snapping at the other. I felt my heart grow cold. My blood turned cryonic in my veins. My hand went for my sword, but the hand of the other stayed me.

Green eyes met violet. I could feel the fire in his grip, even through the gauntlet, and in that moment, I knew that it was he whom I had seen in the rock of Calagah all those years ago. He smiled, and I felt a peace and certainty wash over me like summer's rain.

And the other tilted his head toward the light and said to me: "Go."

His voice was deep music.

"I don't know the way!"

"Go!" he said again, and pointed.

There, in the face of that wall of light, was the mouth of a tunnel. Perfectly round and black as night.

He pushed me then, spurred me onward. I found that I could stand.

“Come with me!” I shouted to the other.

In answer, that other Hadrian extended one hand, pointed with one finger at the tunnel, at my heart, and his own. I thought I understood, and bowed my head. “Thank you.” I turned and ran, feeling the ground beneath my feet as firm as stone. When I reached the mouth of the tunnel, I turned back, saw my other self beset, saw Dorayaica and Ushara and the others drawing near. He drew his sword, and lo! Its blade was red fire! His cape spread out behind him like wings as I leaned against the mouth of the tunnel.

But he was slipping away, and Dorayaica with him. They all were. The whole of the void was moving, forever twisting, spiraling away, obeying laws no mortal man could ever understand—nor was ever meant to.

I looked back up the tunnel ahead, cried out, “Hello?”

My own voice returned to me, infinitely reflected. *Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello?*

I looked back into the darkness, saw only blank stone.

There was only one path to follow, and so I did, kindling the lamps in my suit. The light showed only black stone, the walls inscribed with the circular markings that were the telltale emblem of the Quiet’s design. The other Hadrian had opened a doorway, admitted me to that vast and labyrinthine machine.

There was only one path. Only one way forward.

Forward.

Not left. Not right.

I followed it, kept following it. I am not certain how far I walked, or for how long.

In time, the walls began to fade, to turn almost to glass. It was hard to tell, at first. Outside there was only dark, but in time stars appeared, peering in like the eyes of the Watchers. I stopped, looked out, one hand still upon the wall. There was no malice in the stars.

“Thank you,” I said to the darkness. To the other. To the Absolute, who had sent him.

I shouldered my pack, felt the weight of the captain’s tank.

The walls continued to fade as I went, turning from glass to smoke . . . to nothing at all. I felt the time-tide tugging at my ankles once again, and turning my head to look, I saw not the sides of the crystal tunnel, but myself, infinitely reflected. They had brought me back to the shores of ordinary time.

I took a step, another, watched whole hosts of other Hadrians blink out of existence with every step as a new, fresh host took their place.

Solid ground beneath my feet. Hard metal. I heard my bootheels ringing, saw ghostly walls of black metal and of gold. My next step carried me through just such a wall. I was not *quite* back. I saw the Martians at their posts, and knew I was where I wanted to be—where I was *meant* to be.

That was when I heard it: a snuffling, muttering, sorrowing sound. Wraith-like then, I passed through a cubit of titanium clad in ebony and gold, and entered an inner chamber. Carpets thick as fallen leaves awaited me, and gilded furniture with cushions of red velvet. The source of the sound was the four-poster bed that dominated the inner chamber, its hangings of red samite embroidered with cloth of gold. I drew nearer. A woman lay upon it, facedown, her white robe tangled about her bare legs, her hair a snarl.

She was crying.

“Selene,” I said, speaking softly.

She gave no sign that she had heard, still sobbed into her pillow.

“Selene?”

“. . . de—deliver us . . .” she heaved. “O Mother, deliver us.”

She was praying, praying to the very false goddess, Earth, whose priests had tried to destroy me.

“From the Will of the mighty, O Mother, deliver us.” Her shoulders shook with every word.

“Selene . . .” I tried again, standing almost over her.

She could not hear me.

“From the snares of the liar, O Mother, deliver us,” she said. “Deliver *him*.”

I froze.

“He cannot have done it,” she said, shaking. “He wouldn’t have. He couldn’t have, he—he is a good man. I know he is. And Father—no. No, no, no. No . . .” She writhed, pushed her head into the pillows. One fist rose, fell, hammered the pillow as she shrieked. “No!”

“Selene!” I shouted.

She sat up, looked round, eyes wide and red and raw. Charcoal black as ink ran down her cheeks, smeared where she had pressed her face into the mattress. But she looked right through me at the door.

The princess sank back onto the bed, curled on one side, her knees drawn to her breast. “All my life . . .” she whispered, her back now to me. “All my life . . . I waited. Waited. I did everything Father asked of me . . . all those years . . . and for what? For this?”

“Selene . . .” My voice was quieter then, gentler. I reached out with one hand to touch her flank.

“All my life!” She was shaking, rocking where she lay.

My hand passed through her.

“I suffered for you,” she said, and I knew she was speaking to me—though she did not know I could hear her. “All my life . . . they put me away. Put me in a box. Over and over. All so they could save me for you. And now this . . .” One hand plucked furiously at a loose thread in the pillow. “You killed them . . .”

“I didn’t kill them, Selene,” I said. “Your brother did. Your priests . . .” But she could not hear me.

Her pain was a foretaste—I realize now—of the anguish that would come: the paroxysms that would break the galaxy in the wake of what was yet to be.

Once more I reached for her, meant to touch her shoulder.

“I loved you,” she said, speaking to the phantom she had conjured in my image and name. “I *love* you . . . I . . .”

They had done this to her. Alexander and Tarquin, Kosis and Yod. And

William, I realized with a pang. He and Nicephorus had played their part, forced the poor girl to play hers. It was no wonder she had fled Forum with Neema and Cassandra in the wake of my demise, no wonder she had forced Verus to get her aboard *Ascalon*. I had myself been trapped in a gilded cage, once, and more than once. Power is no privilege to the righteous—and she was very good.

I drew my hand away, lingered only a moment.

Time was short.

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CHAPTER 63

THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

PASSING THROUGH WALLS AND bulkheads, past Martians and Excubitors and servant androgyns, I came to cross the chessboard tile floor and pass through the inner doors to stand before His Radiance. I felt the carpet lush beneath my feet, and—acting on some instinct—I removed the pack that held Here Soonchanged’s undead corpse. It *thumped* as it struck the floor, and I knew that I was returned to that world we call *real*, though it is but a shadow of things higher.

“You?” The word broke on the air, followed by the heavy *thud* of a mug striking the carpet. “How?”

It was the doctor, Vrael, his pale hair disheveled beneath his black skullcap. He looked as if he had not slept in days. His suit was stained and badly rumpled, and there was a darkness under either eye.

“Don’t,” I said, raising a hand.

Vrael raised a hand, as if to ward off evil, turned his face away. “How did you get in here?” There was terror in his voice.

“Wake him up,” I said.

“I—” Vrael stammered, “but—”

“There’s no time!” I said, thumbing my body shield.

Just in time. The doors at my back banged open, and stunner fire flashed through, coruscated off my shield. I whirled, saw two Excubitors advancing, swords afire. I raised a hand to stay them, shouting, “Hold!” The hilt of my sword was in my fist, its blade unkindled. “I am Auctor of the Imperium, and I command you to *hold!*”

To my surprise, it worked. The Excubitors halted, cocked mirror helmed heads. Their blades drooped, but the Martians at their backs did not lower

their guns. “Drop it!” said their captain, his horsehair crest striped red and black. “On your knees!”

“If you miss,” I said, “you’ll hurt the Emperor.”

“I said *on your knees!*” the Martian said.

“Death *first!*” I roared. Pointing the emitter of my weapon at the man like scepter, I said, “I have not come all this way, Captain, to waste time wrangling with you.”

The Martian brandished his stunner, a big, black-bodied rifle. “You’re a murderer!”

“Is that what you think?” I asked, and seeing the figure advancing from the hall behind, I straightened, spoke more loudly. “It was the Chantry. Prince Alexander.”

Lord Nicephorus halted two paces behind the Martian Guard. “We have your . . . confession,” it said.

“My *what?*”

“Your broadcast,” said the Lord Chamberlain.

I felt a mad smile—the old Marlowe smile—steal across my face. “Of course,” I said. *Of course*. The daimon had faked a broadcast, simulated my face and speech. I could see it so clearly. After what I’d done to Eidyn, their version of events would be believed. The whole system would believe.

I had played right into their hands.

“You know what they’re capable of,” I said. “What they are.”

“You deny it?” Nicephorus asked.

“Of course I deny it,” I said, speaking more quickly. “Why would I bomb the city? What do I stand to gain?”

The hairless creature blinked at me, recoiled. “Why . . . the throne!”

I almost laughed. “If I wanted the throne, I would take it. If I wanted Alexander dead, I would have destroyed the whole planet, not bombed half of Catraeth!” I thrust a finger toward the far wall, vaguely in the direction of the planet I knew was out there. “You think it coincidence Fort Din escaped unscathed? You think my aim so poor?”

The Lord of the Androgyns narrowed its eyes, then raised one hairless brow. “What is that?” it asked, indicating the bag at my feet.

“Proof,” I said in answer.

“Of what?” asked Nicephorus. “Your innocence?”

“Their guilt,” I answered, locking eyes with that man who was no man at all. “I did not do this thing, Nicephorus. I swear it.”

I heard the scuff of soft-slipped feet, and the eunuch’s dry voice saying, “Open it.”

I did not dare move, did not dare kneel. Turning my head, I said, “Doctor Vrael, if you would.”

The little man jumped. “Me?”

I waved my sword at him. “Please.”

Following a nod from the Chamberlain, the doctor advanced, undid the bag’s closures. Seeing the contents, he recoiled, leapt up, cursing. “*Ben zona!*”

The Martians flinched. Nicephorus advanced. Only the Excubitors were unmoved.

“What is that?” Vrael asked, again made the warding gesture with an open hand.

“One of the Extrasolarians,” I said. “A captain of the armies of Vorgossos. One of Kharn Sagara’s ilk.”

Nicephorus passed the Martians, advanced to stand between the Excubitors, its hands tucked into wide sleeves, its eyes intent as it peered into the open bag. Presently, it looked to me, eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

“The Chantry have a daimon,” I said. “They’ve been controlling all communication in the system *for years*. Since Lord Tarquin arrived, at least . . .” I cast my eyes at the roof above. “They may be listening, even now.”

“Not here,” said Nicephorus. “The royal apartments are shielded.”

“The medical equipment—”

“The Emperor’s life support is on a closed system,” said Doctor Vrael, unable to take his eyes off the bloated, half-dead chrysalid in the tank. “There’s no connection to the outside.”

That sent a wave of relief through me. William was safe—as safe as a man dying of the rot could be.

“Nicephorus.” It was hard to conjure up the words. But it had to be said. “The Eternal City is lost.”

“What?” The word was like a knife.

“The Cielcin destroyed it,” I said, “almost two years ago.” I explained what had happened: that the Cielcin had annihilated the Eternal City, that the Chantry had blocked that news, manipulated every incoming message, every tightbeam, every telegraph . . . all to isolate *me*.

“They want *Demiurge*,” I said, “and the throne.”

Nicephorus began haltingly. “If . . . what you say is true—”

“It is true!” I said, indicating the body of Here Soonchanged. “It killed the captain. The Chantry’s daimon. But not before he gained access to their databanks.”

The Lord Chamberlain’s face darkened. “What did you do?”

“We attacked *Ararat*,” I said, and explained how Here Soonchanged had used *Demiurge*’s supercomputer to attack the Chantry flagship. “There is a copy of everything he took on his neural implants.”

Nicephorus just looked at me a moment, saying nothing. The androgyn’s eyes slid to the face of the Emperor sleeping in the tank. “Is it . . . dead?” asked the androgyn.

“Brain-dead,” I said. “The Chantry’s daimon saw to that.” Doctor Vrabel had restored Here Soonchanged to an upright position, was studying the connections on the base of the jar. “We must awaken His Radiance.”

Nicephorus’s eyes flashed. “Don’t you touch him! Don’t you dare!”

Doctor Vrabel flinched at the venom in the Chamberlain’s soft voice, but he managed to add, “If we—if I awaken the Emperor—”

“He’ll die,” said Nicephorus.

“His condition is very advanced,” said the doctor. “The cancer is in his blood. His lymph nodes. You can see the rapid growth in the left side. The tumors make total exsanguination difficult. The risks of cryoburn—”

“I understand,” I said. “Nevertheless, we must awaken him.”

“To clear your name?” Nicephorus sneered.

“To save the realm,” I said, voice firm. “Forum is lost, Nicephorus. The Empire is broken. The Chantry have lied to you. Alexander is theirs. You

know he is. You know they mean to take control of the Imperium. They have only been waiting for William to die.”

“And you want to kill him!” the Chamberlain snarled.

“He is dead already,” I said. “You know that. By keeping him alive, you have tried to hold back the future, but the future is here. Alexander has made his move.”

“Against you!” the androgyn quipped.

“Because I,”—it took all my composure not to shout—“am the only man in this system with the strength to stop him and his *daimon-worshipping* friends. If he takes *Demiurge*—if the Chantry takes *Demiurge*, I should say—they will rule the Empire for the rest of time. *Everything* William has built, everything he fought for, everything he has done will be for nothing!”

Nicephorus’s eyes went to the glowing tank at my back, the banks of medical equipment. “How did you get in here?” it asked.

“I walked,” I said, refusing to elaborate.

The androgyn’s green eyes held mine a moment, as if searching for some sign of duplicity. At last, it turned away, disgusted, and waved a hand. “Take him.”

The two Excubitors advanced at once. Kindling my blade in answer, I shouted at the androgyn’s retreating back, “Who should inherit the throne?”

The Martians had not fired, heeding my earlier warning about the Emperor’s safety. I thrust my blade in the face of the nearer Excubitor, prompting them both to draw back.

“Hold!” Nicephorus looked back over one shoulder. It paused before answering. “If what you say is true,” it said, “Aurelian is dead.”

“What of Selene?” I asked. It was a mistake.

“And yourself beside her?” Nicephorus sneered. “If you touched that girl—”

“What other choice is there?” I asked, ignoring the threat and all its implications. “Matthias?”

“Matthias is spare parts,” said Nicephorus. “He should have been born a eunuch. Then at least there would be no shame in his playing the catamite —”

“Then who?” I asked. “There must be an heir somewhere! Avalon! Shakespeare! Renaissance?”

The Lord of the Androgyns studied me then a long time, my blade floating between one Excubitor and the next. “There is no one. More than half the Emperor’s children would have been at Forum . . . all the little ones. The rest . . . there’s not a one equal to the throne. Empty heads. Empty hearts.” It looked up at William’s dreaming form.

“Then we *need* him,” I said. “Now more than ever.”

In that moment—for that moment—the fate of all man’s empire lay upon the slim shoulders of a slave. Nicephorus had been born of the tanks, woven of the same stuff as the Aventine House, the same blood, the same promise. But the scholiasts and magi who had woven its genome had made it half-formed: hairless, sexless, less than a man. In that moment, it stood above even the Emperor, for it held in its frail and delicate hands the power of life and death over the Emperor himself—and through him, over the Empire entire. How many trillion souls hung in the balance?

“You’re right,” it said at last, and gestured for the men to stand down. “Doctor Vrabel. Make the preparations necessary to awaken the Emperor.”

Doctor Vrabel nodded. “Of course, Lord Chamberlain.”

Then Nicephorus shut its eyes. “If you are lying to me, Lord Marlowe . . .”

“I lie far less than my reputation has led you to believe,” I said. “But if I am wrong . . . we may all be dead before the day is done.”

. . .

The body of Here Soonchanged was taken away with warnings about the Chantry’s daimon. The men who came to collect it were HAPSIS men—I recognized the hand emblem on their collar tabs. That filled me with some relief. They were the Emperor’s men. His, and not the Chantry’s. What was more, they would understand enough of machine warfare to insulate the captain’s corpse against attacks.

I had only to wait, and waited in the Emperor's own chambers. The fact of my presence there—Nicephorus agreed—must remain an utter secret, and so the Martians that had entered were sequestered, held by the Excubitors in another room of the royal apartments, apart from Vrabel and myself.

The Emperor's apartments were monitored by closed-circuit security, isolated from the broader workings of the ship. I had to hope that whatever systems the HAPSIS men used to plumb Here Soonchanged's hidden depths would be likewise, and not for the first time lamented my total ignorance of the machine realm.

"How *did* you get in here?" Doctor Vrabel asked. He had replaced the coffee he had dropped at my appearance, and sat on a velvet chaise pushed against the wall. I looked at him, but did not speak. The man blanched, stammered. "I—I . . . I only wondered."

"I did not lie," I said. I had seated myself in a high-backed chair against the wall opposite, long legs stretched before me. "I walked."

"You mean . . . an EVA?" Vrabel asked. I had since removed my helm. "But how did you get in *here*?"

I only smiled. To explain hyperspace—the ocean beyond time—would take more words than I had in me then. "Let's just say it's magic."

"There's no such thing," Vrabel said.

I did not lower my gaze. The doctor buried his discomfort in his coffee.

"You are a Jew, are you not?" I asked. The fellow looked suddenly afraid, and I wondered, raised a hand for peace. "Does not your God work miracles?"

Still visibly tense, the little doctor said, "Once, perhaps. No more."

That answer surprised me. "What changed?"

"We grew wiser," Vrabel said, "wise enough to understand most of what once we thought were miracles." He sighed, set the coffee precariously on the padded seat beside him—playing with fire once again.

"Not *most*," I said. "Creation is an ocean, Doctor. Man's knowledge might fill a thimble."

Vrabel shrugged. "We can argue about the depth of the universe some

other time.” He sat, staring past me, the image of exhaustion.

I might have pressed him, but I let it go. A moment passed in relative quiet.

“How confident are you that you can revive him?”

The question leached what little color remained from Vrabel’s face, and he said, “I can revive him, without question. The *question* is what condition he will be in *when* I revive him.”

“Cryoburn?” I asked.

“That,” Vrabel allowed, “and the machine. We have to run a low-grade current through his brain to simulate cognition without revitalizing the tissue. There is always a chance of marginal injury. Cognitive decline. Memory loss.”

I was silent a moment, then, reflecting that I had come to kill a man. To kill the Emperor. I had come to sentence him to live to death. “How long does he have?” I asked.

Vrabel took another noisy sip from his coffee. “A year perhaps, perhaps less. This virus the Extrasolarians manufactured . . .” He shuddered. “It’s an evil thing. It doesn’t kill as quickly as it should. Not all the growth is tumorous. There is benign hypertrophy. New muscle, new bone—much of the pain is new bone growth. The benign growth races the tumors, drags the whole thing out.” He drank, cursed in his native tongue. “He may have as little as days.”

“Can I speak to him now?”

Vrabel shook his head. “He’s been nonresponsive for months.”

“You’re sure he’s still in there?” I asked.

“We may know soon . . .”

It was another hour before Nicephorus appeared, looking—if anything—gaunter and more haggard than usual. It did not speak as it entered, merely stood in the doorway, one hand holding the other, face still as stone. From the fresh makeup it was wearing, I guessed it had been weeping. I waited for it to speak.

“It is true,” it said at last, looking at me with eyes wide and bright with grief. “The City . . . Forum, it’s . . .”

“Gone,” I said.

Nicephorus shut its eyes. “Dorayaica’s grand assault was just a feint. All those worlds . . . they were meant to distract us.”

I had not seen the proof myself, had trusted Orphan. “What did you see?”

“The fleet was overwhelmed,” Nicephorus said. “Five hundred Cielcin worldships. Five *hundred*, Marlowe.” The doors shut behind the Chamberlain, plunging us into renewed gloom.

“And now they’re coming here,” I said.

“You don’t know that,” Nicephorus said. “You can’t.”

“They *are* coming,” I said once more. I had seen Dorayaica in the darkness beyond, and knew that now—finally—I was right. “They know they have pulled the Empire up by its roots. And they know we have the seeds *here*.” I stood.

Nicephorus clenched its jaw. “They hid it from us,” it said, “all of us. The survivors at Forum telegraphed us nineteen months ago. They dispatched couriers, but those men won’t arrive—not for more than a decade.”

“By then there will be no one here to warn,” I said. “The Cielcin are fast, far faster than we.”

“Doctor Vrael,” said Lord Nicephorus, speaking to the room at large, as though the little physician were a soldier at his ease. Doctor Vrael had not moved at all while we spoke, sat staring into the dregs of his cup. He started when Nicephorus said his name, and stood, bowing. “You must awaken His Radiance at once.”

CHAPTER 64

ALL HIS LUCENT EMPIRE

DAY CAME SWIFTLY ON Gododdin. The twin mirrors rose first, each catching a portion of the coming day before the sun itself reared its doomed head above the horizon, so that day sprang up at once, summoned by the mere adjustment of those mirrors at the critical moment.

That light—when it came—shone down upon destruction.

The blast that had taken more than half of Catraeth—and nearly all of the camps—had left a crater. The annihilative properties of the matter-antimatter reaction converted matter to pure energy, unleashing a fireball that consumed all it touched, carving into the earth and blasting apart stone and steel alike. The massif looked as though some colossal beast had taken a bite out of it, leaving tunnels and pipelines exposed.

The air was filled with ships: swift Sparrowhawks circling, fat-bellied Ibises carrying relief teams and troop detachments every which way. I watched them from a gallery above the converted hold that was to function as the Imperial court-in-exile.

“Uncle Nick told me the blast was centered on the lazaret.” Selene stood not far off, her face a powdered mask, her voice dry as dead leaves.

“Of course it was,” I said, not taking my eyes from the devastation. “That was the point. Your brother wanted himself unburdened. This way, he defeats the plague and *Hadrian Marlowe* both.” I spoke my own name with a bitterness that astonished even me. “They think I want the throne, Selene.”

She hugged herself. “That’s only because they want it, you know.”

“I do,” I said. “It was a mistake to come back here.”

The princess did not reply, remained hugging herself, staring out the window.

All about us was black marble and gold. Sir Verus stood—its armor freshly polished—not five paces from its mistress’s side. Distantly, I could hear the sounds of men and eunuchs laboring, soldiers and servants scurrying about to prepare the Emperor’s audience.

A reckoning was nigh.

“This would not have happened . . .” I could not finish the sentence, deflected my pain into a clenched fist.

“You mustn’t think that way,” said she, distant as the stars.

“These poor people would still be alive,” I said.

“You didn’t kill them,” she said.

Her reassurance meant little.

I meant to destroy the planet completely. To turn Gododdin’s star against the Cielcin armada when it came. I looked at her, knowing I had intended far worse—though I had endeavored to save as many as I could.

He is a good man, she’d said, sobbing into her mattress. *I know he is.*

Was I good?

Who could say?

I did not want the people of Gododdin to die—had tried for years to save them. But Alexander had prevented me, every step of the way. He, and Amon Kosis, and Lord Tarquin, and Cantor Yod. The Chantry. The Choir. This . . . *Order* of theirs. The secret masters of the Imperium. They had turned their weapons against the very people we were supposed to defend. And for what?

Power.

And yet I could never have saved them all. Not had I a hundred years to prepare. The task was simply too great.

But the Cielcin could not stand. The Watchers had to be stopped. I would not destroy even one innocent in the pursuit of that victory . . . but if ten thousand were to die along the path that led to man’s salvation *despite* my aim . . .

“No,” I said at last, agreeing with her. “I didn’t kill them. But I could not prevent their deaths.”

“How could you have?” asked the Princess Selene.

I felt her look at me at last, and turned to meet her gaze. Her eyes were malachite and white jade, shining with a cold, pained light. I did my best to smile, recalling her tears, her fury—the pain she hid behind her smile. “By being more,” I said. “I have more power at my command than any man in human history, and still it’s not enough.”

“Doesn’t that tell you something?” she asked.

What could I say? Outside, I watched a cloud of Sparrowhawks circling, accompanying a cloud of shuttlecraft rising from Fort Din.

“Then all we have is a choice of evils,” I said. “Maybe we can do nothing good.”

She shifted a little nearer. I stood still as stone, watching the shuttles. “They’re coming,” I said. “Have you seen him yet?”

I could hear the pain in her voice as she replied, “My father?”

“Yes.”

“Yes,” said she, and I felt her retreat ten thousand light-years inside herself.

“Is he—”

“He is . . .” she hesitated, struggling to find the words, “as you have seen him. But he is himself.”

“Good,” I said, and felt a palpable wave of relief rush over me. I wanted to say . . . something. To tell her what I’d seen on my return out of eternity. That I had been there. That I . . . understood. But I sensed that to do so was a betrayal, a breach—almost—of trust. It was as though I had seen her naked—as indeed I had, before ever we’d met.

I turned my head away, marked the sudden tension in the Martians that held the inner door some ten paces to our right. “Come, Princess. It is time.”

• • •

I stood—at the Emperor’s command—upon the steps of the dais, beneath the prudence barrier that separated Caesar from the rest of us. The

Emperor's advisors—scholiasts and soldiers, logothetes and lickspittles—stood behind at either hand, half in shadow. Below us, hemmed in by the Martian Guard at either hand, stood various court luminaries, a menagerie of gaily dressed officials fluttering, muttering, ready for what came.

Then a Martian lictor slammed his fasces against the strike plate by the doors once, twice, three times. The ornate doors were opened—and more—the whole of the court was opening, the ship transforming like some elaborate jewel box. The mighty pillars that anchored the gold-and-cobalt vaults above extended with a grinding sound like thunder, so that the roof became a kind of pavilion, admitting the cold light of day. Banners bearing the badge of Empire a hundred feet high fluttered in the open doors as the ramp was lowered, revealing the Martian legions gathered in formation on the landing field outside. The walls were opened, massive leaves folding down so that the court, which before had been a dim, Romanesque place of slitted windows and golden shadows . . . became a temple of light.

My eyes were drawn to the heavens, and my hair floated once more upon the winds of Gododdin. I had taken a dose of antivirals not an hour before, still could taste the bite of iodine in the back of my throat, a constant reminder that we were not safe.

“There he is,” Selene whispered. I felt her hand close about my wrist.

I saw him, too, clad in white and crimson, his helm upon his head. How ridiculous that outfit seemed—after what he had done—a mere affectation, an actor's costume.

Amon Kosis marched beside him, and about him moved a great many of the towering warriors, the image of Mars—Phobos and Deimos like eyes before the red planet—shining on their breasts. And there, that block of black on black! That was the Chantry. A cloud of clerics in robes like the night, their chasubles decked with stars. White were the caps upon their heads, and white their stoles, and white the *hedjets* worn by their priors, and the *nemes* worn by Lord Tarquin himself.

The wind lifted their robes as they mounted the ramp, and turned the cloaks of the Martians and the prince to banners.

Red and black.

My colors.

“Father!” Alexander wasted no time. “I am relieved to find you alive!” He hurried between the shoals of Martians, came to stand before the double row of Excubitors that formed a wall on the lowest step of the dais. His eyes found mine. “Less relieved to find you in the company of this murderer! What lies did he tell you? What—”

The prince fell silent.

The Emperor had raised a hand. Red silk covered the mottled flesh, concealed the corruption beneath. The hand trembled, but the will that held it was firm.

Alexander broke against his father like water on rock.

“Enough.” The Emperor’s voice was like the wind through leafless branches. A lifeless, creaking thing. “We have already heard *more* than enough.”

The Emperor reclined on a bed of red velvet, his body secured by black thongs that held him almost upright. His androgyns had dressed him in lividest white, so that almost it hurt to look upon his raiment. A crimson toga, gold embroidered, hung from his left shoulder like a *mandyas*, concealing the ruin of the left arm beneath. He was hooded, and the mask that concealed his face was of hammered gold and gold enameling, its likeness recalling that of the man in his prime of life: handsome, hawk-nosed, utterly serene.

It was the image of an age now past, or passing . . . never to come again.

“Father, this man—”

“We said *enough*, Alexander!” The Emperor’s voice broke with strain, making Doctor Vrabel flinch. The hand inside the sarcophagus fell, and for a moment, William labored, straining against his bonds, against gravity, against the cancer resident in his flesh. “We know it was you.”

The prince blinked, taken aback. “Is that what *he* told you? Father, this man *destroyed* Eidyn! He gave our location to the Cielcin, compromised *your* security. He—”

At a sign from the Emperor, the lictor slammed his fasces against the

strike plate, trampling Alexander's words to dust. The prince's face faltered, and he had the grace to go silent—or else lacked the courage to forge on.

"I dreamt too long," William said, abandoning the royal style, speaking in that moment as William, the man. "I hoped to preserve myself for the end, but I see that while I waited for our doom to come from outside, the rot at home has spread." He gestured to Nicephorus, who stood silent by.

The androgyn depressed some hidden control, and at once images appeared in the air beneath the cobalt dome, still photographs and short-run video taken by the defense fleet at the sack of Forum.

The white towers of the Eternal City were black with smoke. Holy islands fell from the sky, smashed into others. I saw men running, cameras bouncing. There were Cielcin reavers on the steps of the Jewel of Heaven, and fires in the Royal Wood. I could imagine the screaming, the stink of blood and burning meat.

The sky above the Peronine Palace was filled with strange and skeletal moons.

"What is this?" asked one faceless courtier.

That question unleashed a torrent of words and frantic motion as men and women whispered, pointed, spoke to one another. Still others cried out as understanding dawned, or fell to their knees. This was no nightmare, no wretched dream.

"How long did you intend to conceal this from us?" asked the Emperor, his royal affect restored. "Did you think you *could* conceal it? To what end? The throne?" The red hand rose again, palm flat against the glass wall. The Emperor's head was bowed. "The throne was yours. You had only to wait."

"Father . . ." Alexander took a step forward, head bowed.

"Not *you*," William said. One finger tapped the glass, pointed at Lord Tarquin. "You."

That Prince of the Chantry stepped forward, black armored beneath his long cape and the jaguar skin he wore, the corona about the Earth emblem on his chest glowing with white light. He had painted his face as if for sacrifice, the eyes blackened, face made pale. "It was not our intention to conceal the truth from *you*, Savitar."

“Who then?”

“The demoniac!” Tarquin said, and thrust a finger up at me. “He is not what he seems!”

“Father . . .” Reaching up, Alexander removed his helm, handed it to Amon Kosis. He approached the dais, hands empty, outstretched, pleading and placating. “You are not well. You have been in fugue a long time, and Doctor Vrabel’s machine . . .”

“You think me senile?” asked His Radiance.

Had some dowager in the rear of the hall dropped her sewing needle, I might have heard it then. Even the wind was silent, through the tall banners blew. I pitied the prince in that moment—a boy in truth—caught between his father and the snakes with whom he’d made his bed. “No!” he said, too quick, defensive. “But you’re confused, Father. Marlowe has deceived you. He is an agent of the Extrasolarians. You know what he did to Lord Douro. What he did to Eidyn!” His words were gaining speed, his voice strength. “You see what he did to our city? To our people?” He put a hand to his own breast. “And he says that *I* did this? *I*, who have served you faithfully these long centuries? Have I not been always at your side?” He raised his hands to the sky, to the holographs showcasing Forum’s destruction. “This is his proof? Some *false images*? Father . . . if Forum were destroyed, there would be telegraphs. *Thousands of telegraphs.*”

He played his part nigh perfectly: hands wringing, eyes questing for any friendly face. The prince seemed like a man on the edge of madness, as though his life—and his grasp on reality—hung in the balance.

Or was it only another mask?

His argument sent ripples through the court about him, as though his words were stones. The prince spoke sense, plain and simple, and so sweetly—so tinged by concern for his dying father.

Sensing that I was on the verge of a response, Selene caught my wrist. I looked at her, at the Emperor in his glass-and-iron prison. She was right, I knew. It was right that he should speak.

“There *were* thousands of telegraphs,” said the Emperor slowly. “They were intercepted. All of them . . . intercepted.”

“Your Radiance,” said Lord Tarquin, advancing so that he stood apart from his black-robed fellows. “There is no means of intercepting a quantum telegraph. The Latarran claim to have done so was proved false . . .”

The Emperor’s voice erupted, amplified to many times its earlier volume by a console at His Radiance’s right hand. “Do not wrangle with me, priest! I know what you are. I have *always* known. Since *Ragol*. Since Leo . . .” He broke off, interrupted by a fit of coughing.

I looked to Selene, mouthed the name: “Leo?”

She shook her head.

Tarquin had the sense not to argue, stood there in his full regalia, the Egyptian *nemes* on his head white almost as the Imperial robes. The cloud of priors and Sentinel soldiers shifted posture, as if rocked by some tide.

“There is a daimon aboard *Ararat*,” said the Emperor, voice filling the whole of that crystal pavilion, that pure fane. The courtiers rippled at his words, muttered and whispered, faces hid behind hands, behind fans of paper, of silk, or lace. “You have used it to conceal the truth from our Legions. From our auctor. From *me*.” The last word was a raven’s *quark*, a thing rough and ugly—full of pain. Not *us*, he’d said.

Me.

The Emperor fell silent, good hand fiddling with the console inside his sarcophagus.

Tarquin dissembled, saying, “Radiant Majesty, you are mistaken—”

But he had stepped into the Emperor’s trap. The sound that emerged from the glass coffin was so loud that women in the back of the court squealed, covered their ears.

“You will destroy it!” The Emperor’s voice was like the voice of god, seeming to come from everywhere at once. “You will lay its body here at our feet!”

To my surprise, Alexander stepped forward—he was within arm’s reach of the Excubitors before the steps of the dais then, not five paces from where I stood with his sister. “It is a trick, Father,” he said, voice softer, gentler, eminently reasonable. He extended a hand to me, palm upward.

“This man . . . he deceives you! Is it not by Extrasolarian praxis that he claims to know these things?”

There had been more in the trove Here Soonchanged had stolen from *Ararat*’s systems than the simple fact of Forum’s annihilation. Through D, the Chantry possessed complete dominance of the local datasphere. They had every communication, every suit readout, every camera feed. The daimon was everywhere at once—was doubtless in that room that very moment, peering out from every camera eye, every terminal, every grain of spydust tossed upon the wind.

The Emperor had seen it all. HAPSIS had briefed him on everything once Vrabel and his other physicians had revived him. Both they and Legion Intelligence had pored over the oceans of data recovered from Soonchanged’s body. They would be centuries unravelling it all, but the first cursory scan had found all the evidence they needed.

“If it is deception,” said the Emperor, “then let the truth stand. Open your ships to my men. Surrender yourselves.”

Here Tarquin bridled. “That is impossible, Caesar. You have no authority —”

“I have *all* authority!” the Emperor said. He did not shout, and his voice rasped, still hugely amplified. “I *am* Mankind!” the Emperor said. “Who are you, priest?”

Tarquin had a choice then: to defy the Emperor was to court civil war, to crack the Empire down the middle. But to capitulate . . .

I have always known. That was what His Radiance had said to me. *I am Emperor. I rule. Should rule. Not the Chantry.*

He had fought them all his life, and here he stood, on the precipice of victory: poised to break the Cult of Earth.

“We asked you a question, Lord Tarquin,” the Emperor said.

The painted priest drew himself up to his full height. He did not bow, or bend, or scrape. Nor did he whine, or whimper, or prevaricate. The excuses he had hurled had been a smokescreen, never a defense. “I am a Prince of Mother Earth’s Holy Chantry,” he said and pointed up at me. “That man is a demoniac and a sorcerer. He destroyed the planet Eidyn. Bombed Catraeth.

And he has compromised the security of this base. You trust his word against mine?"

I heard Selene curse under her breath.

"Hadrian Marlowe is not on trial here," said the Emperor sternly, raising his hand to the holographs above: the Eternal City burning, its isles plunging into endless skies. "Do you deny Lord Marlowe's evidence?"

"Certainly, I deny it!" Tarquin said. "It is madness!"

"They're stalling . . ." Selene whispered, voice hardly to be heard.

She was right, of course. That was why they had come. To buy time, just as I had done by my surrender. They played the mirror move. The same gambit. But if they destroyed the evidence, if they killed their daimon . . . it would be possible to communicate with the wider galaxy, possible to confirm the Eternal City was lost. What did they hope to gain by lying?

Only time.

I looked up at William, white robed, gold masked.

How much time would they need?

With Forum gone, it would be a small thing to take the throne. If William could not break the triumvirs before his end, they would win by default.

Freeing William from his icy dreams might yet prove my salvation, but if the Chantry and the prince could wait him out . . . let the plague run its course . . .

"Do you or do you not possess a machine intelligence capable of interfering with our transmissions?" the Emperor asked.

"Your illness has taken your mind!" said Tarquin. "Do you hear yourself? You accuse *us*, Mother Earth's Holy Priesthood, of abomination?"

The lictor's fasces banged the floor again, and a tumult erupted as the Emperor's defenders shouted their outrage. Tarquin stood above it all, eyes bright, defiant, like a finger of unmoved stone above the tide. Did they seriously hope to discredit the Emperor? Could they?

No, I thought. Selene was right. They hoped only to muddy the water, to cloud the minds of as many as they could. The minds of men were—by design—closed to machine praxis. But not to lies.

The Emperor raised a hand, and by the silence that by stages fell asserted that he still was Emperor of all mankind. The lictor's fasces struck again: once, twice, three times, the iron sound of it like a battering ram against the walls of every skull. Into the breach that ram had made in the wall of sound, the Emperor spoke. "If you are innocent," he said to the white-capped priest, "you will open *Ararat* and all your ships to my men for inspection at once."

Lord Tarquin, that Prince of Earth, that Auctor of the *Equal of Emperors*, looked upon the sarcophagus that stood where the throne should sit, and asked, "And if I refuse?"

They would court war, then. I marked Amon Kosis, First Legate of the Martian Legions, where he stood holding Prince Alexander's helm. The Martians would break, I knew—brother against brother, father against son. All while the Cielcin had turned their prows at last upon Gododdin.

Who then could speak? Who then could cow these princes of humanity, and the principalities that possessed them?

Only me.

And if I refuse?

"Then I will destroy *Ararat*!" I cried, standing forth, leaving Selene's side, speaking from my place above the double line of Excubitors. "And every one of your ships, if I must!"

This pronouncement sent a shockwave through the entire court.

"You?" Tarquin's cloak was still thrown back from his right shoulder, baring the liquid black armor and the unkindled blade he wore. "You dare?"

"No more than you!" I said. "And rather less!" I pushed my way between the ranked Excubitors, stood forth before Tarquin and Alexander. "You destroyed the city, you and the prince!"

Alexander's mouth was open, but no sound came out. Whatever riposte he had prepared, whatever response plotted, failed. But it was at Tarquin's face I thrust a finger. "I warned you," I said. "'Do not get in my way,' I said. Yet here you stand, atop how many corpses?"

Tarquin smiled, his electric-blue eyes shining as with Cherenkov

radiation. “You don’t know what you’re trifling with,” he said, “you have no—”

“Earth stands!” I roared, and stamped upon the travertine with a noise like a shot. “The pyramids of America are rebuilt! Most were never abandoned. You took them for yourselves. You *priests*! You are what you claim to oppose: Sorcerers! Demoniacs! Abominations, all!” I stamped again, and the echo of it filled the court like thunder. In the ringing silence, I advanced on Tarquin, drawing ever nearer. “Ten thousand years and more you have kept your thumb on the Imperium, working to wrest control from God’s own Emperor.” I gestured at William where he reclined in his prison of iron and glass. “Even now, with the enemy victorious, you seek your advancement! You would put this *puppet*”—I cast a hand at Alexander —“on the throne!”

“Say that again!” Alexander cried, hand on the golden hilt of his sword. It was his father’s sword, the very blade William had put into my hands in the tunnels of Perfugium.

“Say that again, you snake!”

I turned to face him, the auctor’s cloak about my shoulders, arms at my side. I spread my hands, showed that they were empty. “Strike, dear boy,” I said. “If you think you can. I assure you: Your blade will find naught but air.”

The prince snapped his sword from its catch, never braver than in that moment.

I was proud of him. It was no small thing to stand against me, to take up arms against a hero of legend. But he did. The blade sprang forth as he lunged, lancing out as Alexander swung the weapon in an arc that should have cloven me in two from hip to collarbone. I saw the blade flash under me and through me, felt no pain. My hand caught his wrist as he reached the acme of his swing, held him fast.

I heard Selene scream, felt the cloak of Empire puddle round my feet where the highmatter edge had slashed it all to ribbons. I should have fallen to pieces, should have poured my life’s blood upon the travertine.

Alexander’s eyes went wide as he felt my fingers tighten.

“I told you,” I said, “the truth *will out*.”

The boy snarled, yanked his arm from my grasp. He staggered back, chest heaving, every inch the guilty man. He pointed his sword at my face. “Demon!” he said. “Witch! Fight me fairly!”

I once more spread my hands, the tatters of my cloak loose about my shoulders.

The prince advanced toward me, took one lumbering step.

“Alexander.” The word fell a net tossed over some cornered beast. The Emperor had spoken, and his son turned to look up at him. “Don’t.”

The son wavered, looking from his father to Lord Tarquin, from Tarquin to myself.

“Put down your sword,” William said, “You’ve done enough.”

The red-gloved hand fell, and gave a sign as it fell.

The Excubitors advanced, ranks closing like pincers.

Alexander spoke no word as his father’s men advanced. He looked at me, a loathing and a fear in his eyes unlike anything I had ever seen. Not even Dorayaica hated me so.

Seeing he was outmatched, seeing he would win no argument, Alexander, Son of William the Great, threw down his father’s sword. The prince stood there, and permitted the mirror-clad knights to lay their hands upon him.

“Take him away,” the Emperor said.

That they did, with hands upon the prince’s back, his head, his shoulders, so many of them that the prince was bent almost double. Kosis stood unmoved, still holding the Prince Regent’s helm. Tarquin stood by, his shining *nemes* white upon his crown, almost forgotten. His eyes were on me—as were the eyes of nearly every man and woman in the court.

They had just seen a miracle.

Cantor Yod was watching from the rear of the Chantry’s little party, his tattooed brow furrowed. I recalled the look of terror and of awe on Samek’s face, when I had stood before her in the light of Forum’s long day.

Yod did not look frightened.

He looked . . . almost aroused.

“Lord Tarquin,” the Emperor’s voice was clear. “Come forward.”

The lord of priests hesitated, looked to Yod, as if for a sign.

When none came, Tarquin advanced. Wordlessly, the Excubitors gave way, opened a channel to permit the Prince of the Chantry to ascend the dais. When he did not mount the stairs, William hammered the glass with his fist. “Now!”

I watched Tarquin’s retreating back, the gathered knot of his *nemes* swaying with every step. The topmost of the Excubitors turned to follow his passage, blades forever drawn. As he climbed, I undid the magnetic clasp that held my shredded cloak and let the garment fall.

“Kneel.” The Emperor’s voice was thunder. Smoke.

Slowly at first, then all at once—like a glacier crashing into the sea—he knelt.

Then I forgot to breathe, for what happened next froze my blood and stole the very air from me.

The prudence barrier—that high-energy shield which drew power from the starship’s own reactor—fell, and the Emperor’s sarcophagus stood undefended.

“Approach,” William said.

Tarquin was forced to crawl on his knees to the very foot of the machine that held His Radiance. I saw the field shine as the prudence barrier was restored, trapping Tarquin with the Emperor. Then the red-gloved hand found the control console, entered a command. With a *hiss* of pneumatics, the whole of the sarcophagus hinged open, exposing Caesar to the air.

I saw Lord Tarquin flinch when he realized what the Emperor had done. The rest of the court hushed, tensed. How could they not? They were all then witness to a man’s death—his execution.

The cape that concealed the left arm was twitched aside, revealing the gnarled limb beneath. It was longer than any arm ought to be—must surely have reached Caesar’s knee—and thick, so heavy that to lift it seemed a great strain. A broad, white sleeve concealed all but the hand, which was huge—more than twice the size of the unchanged right. Almost it seemed Orphan’s hand, but the pilot’s strong, right hand had six fingers.

The Emperor's had seven: the two new digits shriveled, curling things beyond what ought to have been the last finger. Each finger wore rings of gold, facets set with rubies and with onyx laser-etched. But he wore no glove, had left the mottled flesh exposed. Wordless, then, the Emperor extended that ulcerated hand, held it before himself. Though his arm shook, he did not let it fall, and I heard him grunt and gasp with pain—sounds amplified by the sound system.

His meaning was plain.

There was nothing Lord Tarquin could do. Nowhere he could run. To refuse was annihilation. To obey was death. The plague would pass from the open wounds on the Emperor's hand to the priest-prince's lips, would quicken in him, until Tarquin came to resemble the Emperor himself: his body transformed, become a prison with no escape—save one.

"Mighty are you among the Princes of the Chantry, Lord Tarquin," said His Radiance, the Emperor William the Twenty-Third. "Mightier than you are we."

When still Tarquin hesitated, the lictor hammered his fasces once more, filling the pavilion with sound. I felt my stomach turn.

Again the fasces fell, and William said, "You will kiss the ring."

The implicit threat resonated in the aftershock of the fasces' falling.

Gingerly then, the Prince of the Chantry took the weeping fingers in his own and pressed his lips to the royal sovereign. There was no sound in all that place. Not one dared breathe, fearing to catch the deadly rot themselves—though the Emperor and his victim both were trapped behind the prudence shield.

His fate sealed, Tarquin drew back, pressed his face to the tile at the Emperor's feet, there stayed.

"Rise," said William. "Put on your mask, Lord Tarquin." To the audience then at large, he said, "Forum is fallen, the Eternal City no more. But the Empire stands! We are what remains . . ." He had hidden his ruined hand by then, and his voice quavered as he spoke, tone amplified once more to Olympic thunder. "The attack was not Lord Marlowe's doing, was rather

part of a plot to depose our duly appointed auctor, and to concentrate power in the hands of *our* Holy Terran Chantry.”

Tarquin still knelt at the foot of the throne, having removed his Egyptian affectation and instead allowed his armor’s helm to close about his head, trapping the plague in with him.

The Emperor continued: “Let no man doubt our justice. Justice will come for the men of this city . . . but the enemy is at our gates. They have burned our home, butchered *our* children . . . and they are coming.” I had told William exactly what I had seen when I crossed to his ship from *Demiurge*. “Long we have lingered here, gathering strength. We have lost our chance to crush the enemy at his weakest. The advantage the Latarrans offered us is of no more use . . .” His voice faltered. “We are dying—that is plain. Our physicians sought to extend our life—our rule—by preserving us in stasis. The end is now upon us . . . what Lord Marlowe says is true: The Chantry have long deceived us. Earth stands, green and good once more. The Chantry have concealed this from the galaxy—even from our very self. They have turned to the very arts they profess to condemn. They have fashioned machine minds as of old, have used one to deceive you all, to keep you in the dark. They *will* be reckoned with.” His barrier vanished, and four Excubitors advanced to seize Lord Tarquin. “But now we have need of all our strength. Every weapon. Every tool. Every power at our command. The princes of the Chantry will hand their ships over to my Martian Legions . . . they will serve our purpose, or die.”

The golden mask turned to regard the rest of the black priests—a knot of timid ravens, their wings fresh-clipped. They looked at one another, kohled eyes wide with fear. Then one of them—a Grand Prior, by her tall *hedjet*—stood forth. “We will serve, O Holy Emperor.”

She sank to her knees, and every one of her fellows after her.

Yod stood last of all, his broad Egyptian collar glittering, the Phoenician letter on his brow wrinkling.

But the Cantor sank to his knees, and pressed his face to the stone floor as Tarquin was escorted from the pavilion.

Only then did my breath return, and the sun shine a little brighter.

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CHAPTER 65

THE LORD OF THE LAST DAY

“**THE DAIMON IS DEAD?**” I asked, turning from my contemplation of the lifeless world outside the window. “You’re certain of it?”

Lord Nicephorus stood in the center of the gallery behind. “We just received word from Sir Gray aboard *Ararat*. He reports that they have euthanized the thing’s . . . organic components.”

Organic components . . . The thought sickened me, filled my head with images of Brethren’s hideous shape, and of the remains of the child prisoned in its still-beating metal heart: unfathomably old, forever young. In days to come, I would be given the reports, shown just what it was Gray Rinehart and the men of Legion Intelligence had found in the heart of *Ararat*. Just whose brain they had placed in the main computer I never learned. But the thing had grown to monstrous size—large as a tortoise—so large it had to be kept in fluid to stop it collapsing like some oversized hydrozoan.

“Might the machine have . . . made a copy of itself?” asked Cassandra, leaning against the frame of the window at my back. “It can do this, yes?”

I looked back at her over my shoulder, a familiar sense of nausea in me.

Cassandra’s own face darkened, and she tilted her head. I had sent for her shortly after the Emperor’s yacht returned to *Aurora*, once His Radiance had made known his plan to cross the system from Gododdin, and she had come—and come alone.

“It can,” I said after the barest hesitation, restoring my attention to Nicephorus. The Chantry were sure to have preserved their daimon in some form. “But if the . . . organic parts are destroyed—”

Nicephorus spoke over me. “It will not be able to resume function at the level previously . . .” The androgyn cast its eyes toward the ceiling, which

was frescoed with an image of medieval knights fighting a red dragon. “Sir Gray has put the Chantry’s people under careful guard. They may yet attempt some mischief, but they are in hand for the moment.”

“For the moment,” I allowed. “But we have our communications back?”

A shadow passed over the Chamberlain’s nobile countenance. “We do.”

“The Eternal City?”

“Gone.” The word was like the shuttering of a lantern.

Gone.

Cassandra cursed softly in her native Jaddian.

“We confirmed with the various sector governors-general,” Nicephorus was saying. “They all say the same.”

It was strange. I had known the fate of the Eternal City then for weeks—it had taken nearly a month to reach our destination—and all that while reports had been streaming in from out-system.

Still my mind could not close around the reality of it all.

All my life, the Eternal City had stood as a monument to man’s greatness, his empire, his triumph over nature itself. It had been a symbol, a thing to stand forever against the infinite dark. The Eternal City was meant to have been *eternal*.

But it was gone.

“Marlowe?”

“What?” I blinked, looked at the painted androgyn.

“I asked if you were ready to go down to the planet.”

“I . . .” I looked out the window again at our destination, that gray and pockmarked face. “Yes, I . . . forgive me, Nicephorus.” Cassandra was watching me, her face betraying her concern. “I was . . . lost in thought, I . . .” I fell silent then a moment. “All this time, I thought I was fighting to save the Empire. But whatever we do save—if we win—it won’t be the galaxy we’ve known.”

The Lord Chamberlain said nothing to that, only pressed its thin lips together.

“There’s been no trouble?” I asked. “From the clergy?”

Nicephorus shook its bald head. “None as yet, but it is early. I do not

think they were prepared for you to *appear* at the Emperor's side."

Though the Emperor had extracted renewed oaths of fealty from the clergymen who had accompanied Alexander and Tarquin to their ill-fated audience with the Emperor, he had not restored his faith in them. Each and every one of them had been arrested and locked away beneath Fort Din. They were hostages, every one, an insurance policy extracted to ensure the continued good behavior of their brothers and sisters in orbit. Already they had spent weeks in their stark cells.

"I should thank you, you know," the Chamberlain said. "The Chantry . . . William tried to break their hold on him all his life. I think you did it." Nicephorus drew itself up to its full height—it was taller than I was by half a head, tall almost as the Emperor had been before his affliction. "I misjudged you, Marlowe. William was right. You are a madman, and you may be a charlatan—for all I know—but you are our charlatan."

For a moment I could not speak. Nicephorus had never liked me, never trusted me. "I did what I had to do," I said, "for all our sakes."

Nicephorus's face might have been stone. "Sometimes," it said, "I think you must be the only other man in the galaxy who knows how he feels." Green eyes flickered from my face to Cassandra's. "You say you do not want the throne, but yours is the only head I see weary as the one that wears the crown."

Agitated, the Lord Chamberlain smoothed its long white tunic, eyes studiously elsewhere.

"How is he?"

"He is alive," Nicephorus said. "That is all that matters." It made an expression then that I struggle to describe. It looked like a smile. The muscles of the androgyn's face moved as if they were smiling. But there was no feeling in that face. Only pain.

Doctor Vrabel and his team had worked tirelessly to keep William alive for the journey that had carried us from Gododdin to her sister planet, but I understood it was no easy feat. The plague itself was incurable, but they'd achieved some success in treating the tumors with cytotoxins. The secretions of a certain adder—administered locally and in controlled doses,

balanced with the application of antivenin—had been used to treat tumors in late-life palatine nobles from time immemorial. The venom had the effect of inhibiting cell division, which hurt the tumors faster than the host. Such treatments, coupled with radiation therapy, could extend the Emperor's life, but Vrabel's estimate—that the Emperor had mere months to live—was looking more apt by the day.

"Why are we here?" Cassandra asked, ever the blunt instrument.

"Were you not briefed?" asked Lord Nicephorus. "There is a weapons cache in *Nemec Patera*, one of the old Imperial stores. It is why we chose this system to coordinate our response to the Cielcin threat."

I stood by, wondering which of the craters on the planet below was *Nemec Patera*, or if it was even visible from our current vantage point. A sour taste filled my mouth. I had not been told about the weapons cache, not in all my time in-system, not in all my centuries of service. Since the very dawn of the Imperium, the lords of the great houses had built such secret bases. They had been necessary during the Foundation War, when secrecy had been man's surest shield in the battle against the machines. Every house had its stockpile, its reserve of doomsday weapons.

The Imperial House had *thousands*.

"I understand that," Cassandra said. "I don't understand why the Emperor is coming himself."

Nicephorus's eyes seemed to follow every line of my face. Presently it smiled, gestured for the door. "Perhaps His Radiance had best explain that for himself."

• • •

Cynon.

Gododdin's sister was as unlike Gododdin as any two planets might be, despite being nearly identical in size. Earth's sister, Venus—I have heard it said—was such a sororal twin: a ball of molten rock and choking gas. But where Venus was fire, Cynon was ice. Where Gododdin was green, Cynon

was pale gray. Where Gododdin was renowned for its constant wind and sunny climes, Cynon was airless and cold. No moon was there in Gododdin's sky. Cynon had four, each as like itself as the last, a string of mottled pearls each tangled round the other.

With no air to scatter the light of day, I could see *Aurora* clearly as we fell, a black-and-gilded blade slashing across the heavens. Others had accompanied it, their hulls shining in the light of my sun, a phalanx of shining spears.

Below, the land lay dead: a wilderness of crags and sullen stone. The planet's face told its story, a tale of impacts and deep time. The tidal stress exerted by its four moons had built great ridges and ranges of mountains that neither wind nor water had worn down, and every impact, every crater remained clearly etched, a monument to the vast and thoughtless mechanics of the universe.

"What is it, Abba?" Cassandra stood at my side upon the bridge of the Emperor's yacht.

"I was just thinking," I said. "I wonder if the impacts that made this crater were a part of the original design."

"What?" I could see her face without turning, knew the eyes were narrowed, the brows knit.

I did not take my eyes off the world beneath us. "The world wasn't meant to end," I said. "Stars burn out because the Watchers deserted their posts. The functions they were meant to maintain fail. Energy is lost . . ." We were passing over a ridge of mountains like the broken teeth of a god. "Orbits decay for the same reason," I said, "because energy is lost." I could just see three of the planet's moons high above us. "Would there have been meteor impacts at all, but for the Watchers?"

She didn't say anything to me then, and for a moment I felt a fool.

"I was going to say . . ." Cassandra ventured, "that I thought it was beautiful."

"It is," I said. "Terrible. And beautiful."

"Flight crew, prepare for landing," came the voice of the flight officer, a Martian commander called Gannon.

Looking back, I surveyed the men on the bridge, each bent to his work. The Martians were all men, all scarred, all with shaved heads and faces hewn from the same marble with dull tools. They looked strange, I thought, in their jeweled and enameled finery, like apes playing at lords.

My back now to the window, I stalked between their consoles, advancing on Gannon where he stood over the center volume—a holograph depicting the surface below in laser light. “How long?” I asked.

Gannon’s eyes looked to me a moment. “Twenty minutes,” said he.

Nemec Patera—the crater, our destination—hove into view on the holograph before me. It was neither the greatest crater on the planet, nor the deepest. The site had been selected for its stability. It was as far from the planet’s many fault lines as it was possible to be, as safe from the tidal force of the four moons as any place on Cynon. The builders had selected the site for its permanence.

Its permanence, and its obscurity.

There was nothing on Cynon save a few abandoned mining outposts, but the planet’s once-promising stock of lithium had long since run dry.

“Abba!” Cassandra waved her hand. “Come and see!”

I left the console, returned to the window.

We had begun our descent into the crater. I felt the yacht’s repulsors shake, saw the surface drawing nearer, the walls of the crater rising up about us. The whole of *Nemec Patera* could not have been more than twenty miles across, but the place was deep, six miles deep at its deepest.

At last I saw it: those ramparts of white stone. I tried to picture the construction: those vast blocks of carbon-reinforced concrete lowered into place by vessels vaster than the one in which we rode, the teams of men on the ground like insects at their work. The decades it must have taken to blast and drill and hollow out the wall and floor of the chasm to make way for the hidden fortress.

“It’s like Vorgossos,” Cassandra said.

Indeed it was. Vorgossos—Fort Grissom—had been to the American Dominion what that place was to the Imperium: a holdout, a bolt-hole, a refuge, and weapon of last resort.

A place for Armageddon.

• • •

Silence.

Darkness.

Day.

Cynon barely turned about her axis, completing one rotation every nine hundred seventeen standard days, so that it took more than a year for the sun to rise there and fall. I did not know it then, but it was the last day that dead world would ever see. Her sun would erupt in fire before it set.

The Martians had gone before us, formed ranks on the landing field. Above and before us rose the great face and fastness of the Imperial fortress, its towers built—like pilasters—against the very wall of *Nemec Patera*.

“Not exactly hidden, is it?” Cassandra said on private band.

“Hush,” I said, and smiled.

During our descent, Gannon had explained to me that the concrete had been mixed with minerals taken from Cynon’s soil, carefully balanced to match the albedo of the native rock, the better to camouflage the construction from long-range sensors. It was perfectly visible to the human eye, but the machines those eyes relied upon might never find the fortress.

A chime sounded in my ears, broadcast over the common band, followed by the first, familiar notes of the Imperial anthem. The Martians snapped to attention, turning first their Corinthian helms, then their whole bodies to face the ramp, lances raised in salute. Their white cloaks moved strangely in the airless space, stiffly, limp as dead sails. I drew my own about myself.

I wished I wore no cloak, bore no title—but I dared not refuse. The Emperor’s patronage was my only shield against doubt and reprisal from those who still supported Alexander—or believed his lies. And so I had donned the white and black of the Lord Shadow once again—though I had cast my cloak at the feet of Prince Aurelian.

But perhaps it was not pure pragmatism.

William was not Aurelian, and despite his constant assertions . . . he was not the Empire.

What he was became clear to me the moment I saw him emerge at the top of the ramp I had but lately vacated, preceded by his Excubitors, flanked by Nicephorus and the Princess Selene.

He was my friend.

His Imperial Radiance, William the Twenty-Third of the Aventine House; Firstborn Son of Earth; Guardian of the Solar System; King of Avalon; Lord Sovereign of the Kingdom of Windsor-in-Exile; Prince Imperator of the Arms of Orion, of Sagittarius, of Perseus, and Centaurus; Supreme Lord of the Cities of Forum; North Star of the Constellations of the Blood Palatine; Defender of the Children of Men; and Servant of the Servants of Earth, stood at the top of the ramp.

Stood.

The Martians cheered. Spears were shaken; feet struck the concrete in strange silence, so that the only real sound was the human clamor of so many hundred throats. The technicians dropped to their knees at the sight, faces to the landing field. Only Cassandra and I stood unmoved: her in Imperial white with her *mandyas* overtop, I in the Lord Shadow's cloak—black above, white below.

The Emperor lurched as he advanced, movements amplified by servos in his suit. The garment had been heavily modified to accommodate his mutation, his hunched shoulders and uneven legs. But it was the left arm that most drew my attention. Doctor Vrabel and his team had devised a kind of brace. It had the appearance of an oversized iron manica, like a cylinder of blackened metal that held the mutated limb straight at the Emperor's side, with no allowance made for the elbow or hand. It hung well past the Emperor's knee, so that almost it seemed a third leg, a prop he might lean upon if he had a mind.

His face was a golden mask beneath his scarlet hood, and though he shambled, limped with every step—though mechanisms in his suit carried

his weight and the weight of his prosthesis, though with his right hand he leaned upon a crutch, and upon Nicephorus—he stood.

The music faded, and His Radiance acknowledged the salutes and adulation of his men with a languid nod. He drew level with Cassandra and myself. How many times had I seen him thus? Riding upon the gestatory throne? Carried by soldiers or by his androgyns?

How fitting it was that at the last—on the last day that world would ever see, in the evening of his Empire—he should stand on his own two feet.

As he drew level with us, the Martians turned as one, facing inward, forming twin shoals of humanity about that rock of Empire. Once more they moved in seeming silence, lending the whole display the quality of a dream. For the moment, our eyes met, and the Emperor gave a weary nod—almost a bow.

I returned the gesture.

William stumbled. I lurched forward, and with Nicephorus, caught him.

The Excubitors did nothing to halt my advance. I saw Selene looking at me, her hand upon the prosthesis that buttressed her father's swollen arm.

The Emperor had dropped his cane, laid his hand on mine.

"Just a little farther," he said. He had not the wit to move his comm to a private band, spoke instead to every man there present as though he were myself. "It is nearly finished."

I knelt, and took up the cane William the Great—William the Lamé, William the Lazar—had let fall. His fingers were like those of a marionette as he took the crutch from me. I could feel the servos in his suit gauntlet whine as he took the weight.

Step by step I followed them, Cassandra at my side. Selene and Nicephorus kept the Emperor from stumbling—though twice more he fell, landing hard upon Vrabel's prosthesis, which indeed seemed designed to keep the man from falling. We had not far to go—a few hundred cubits from the foot of the landing ramp to the doors of the fortress—but for the Emperor, it must have seemed many parsecs.

I found myself remembering another march, another trial, and for a time

it seemed the dead rock of Cynon resounded with harsh voices crying out: *A King! A King! A King!*

My heart moved with pity for the Emperor.

But where I had stumbled, where my trial had been humiliation—his was a triumph, for though age and illness bent and twisted him, he had not broken, and with every step he trod his shame beneath his gilded heels.

Thus he gained the outer gate, and at a sign the doors were opened, operated by Martians who had already worked their way inside by way of a postern hidden further south along the crater wall. The gate was more than two hundred cubits wide, perhaps a quarter as tall. It moved slowly, rising like a guillotine, revealing the night within.

Once inside, we were made to descend an ancient lift. Lamps thousands of years old flared to life at our coming, revealing drab halls of pale stone and heavy metal doors. Our passage carried us out under the crater itself, into that bay where slept the ghosts of the Empire's great age of exploration.

"The weapons in this place were meant for war against the barbarians who had settled the worlds of the Centaurine," William said. "They were made to kill men." The gold mask turned to face me, its owner swaying where he stood. "Now they will save mankind."

Before us stretched a void vast almost as the arsenal aboard *Demiurge*, an airless void as silent as it was dark. There were lights, slowly kindling in random sequence as the antique station—powered by geothermal sinks plunged deep into Cynon's crust—came shuddering back to life. We were below *Nemec Patera* then. The roof above our heads was a hatch, one designed to expose the buried stockpile to the surface.

A pair of androgyns who had accompanied His Radiance from the Imperial yacht had found an old console stool for the Emperor to rest upon. This he did, the tip of his prosthetic brace scraping the ground as he sat, handing his cane to Nicephorus.

"How many are there?" I asked.

It was Nicephorus who answered, clearing space to permit Vrabel and

his technicians—dressed in quilted environment suits—to examine Caesar where he sat by the rail overlooking the weapons cache.

“Forty-one thousand, four hundred seventy-two.”

The nearest rack had just been illuminated. Where I stood at the rail looking down, I was almost level with the base of the warhead, a black bell atop a white-bodied rocket more than a hundred cubits high.

A symbol I had seen only in history books stood painted on the body of each missile: It showed the Earth and sun partly overlapped, stacked vertically, with the Earth above and sun below. A black heraldic eagle stood upon the Earth’s north pole, its wings outstretched. Beside it, painted in letters each taller than a man and running in a column along the entire length of the weapon was an inscription in English letters.

EMPIRE OF EARTH AND SUN.

“When was this place built?”

“Eighth millennium,” came the Emperor’s reply. “Before Sigmund II adopted the Red Sun for his banner.”

Sigmund II had been Emperor in the mid-tenth millennium, during which time the Empire had first come into renewed contact with the peoples of the Lothriad. His rule had defined the buffer zone along the Rasan Belt, helped to normalize relations with the Jaddians, and—most lastingly—had caused the Imperium to change its formal name. Out of amity with the other nations of the galaxy, he had removed Mother Earth from his banners, taking the red sun for his sigil, and reconsecrated his dominion in the name of Earth’s sun alone.

The Sollan Empire.

“The eighth millennium . . .” The missiles were nearly ten thousand years old.

Cassandra made a sound. “The weapons can’t still work!”

“You underestimate Imperial engineering,” Caesar said.

There was an old adage on the Norman frontier, one I’d first heard in the mouth of a starship scrapped on Emesh. “The Normans may build cheap and fast, but only Empire’s built to last.”

I could almost hear the smile in William’s voice as he coughed behind

his mask, said, "That's right . . ." He craned his neck, sat a little straighter. "These weapons will be distributed across the armada. We will use them to break the larger Cielcin worldships. The ones whose fuels reserves are too deep even for kinetic weapons." He grunted, and the tip of the iron coffin that bound his mutated arm struck the floor with a *ping*.

"They're why we're here?" Cassandra asked. No honorific, no regard for decorum. "At Gododdin?"

The golden face turned and peered at my daughter.

Behind him, Selene pressed her lips together, arched her brows.

"Your father's daughter, aren't you?" the Emperor inquired.

"More her mother's."

Cassandra had the grace to duck her head.

The Emperor looked out and down at the now-illuminated missiles where they gleamed in their berths, marching away in ranks like the pillars of some hypostyle. The Martians were already at work, hurrying along catwalks and down iron stairs with the inspection team.

"Legion Intelligence confirmed that the Cielcin are coming," he said at last, not looking at us. "They detected their warp wakes along the trajectory between Forum system and here."

I had known already, had guessed as much from Syriani's words when we had met in the darkness.

"How long?" I asked.

"The Chantry cost us time," William said. "Pretending nothing had happened . . ." He adjusted his prosthesis with his good hand, rolling the afflicted shoulder with a groan that set Vrabel to orbiting. "A little over a year, maybe? Their ships are so much faster than ours, but the variance . . ."

"They'll have to regroup somewhere nearby," I said, "wait for the slower ships."

His Radiance nodded wearily. "We must be ready. We must launch a first offensive."

I shook my head. "We'll never find them. They could regroup anywhere within a hundred light-years of the system."

"We have their telegraphs," said the Emperor.

I shook my head, set my back against the rail. “And if we don’t?” I could not bring myself to explain my encounter with Dorayaica in the void, its belief that the Minoans had betrayed its movements to us. “We have some evidence the Cielcin know their telegraph network is compromised.”

“Then we will meet them here . . .” came the Imperial reply, voice faint as whispers, amplified by my suit speakers to something more intelligible.

“Good,” I said, surprised by the lightness in that word, and the swiftness with which it left my lips. “Good. That is better . . . I . . . I can stop them here.”

“Stop them?” Nicephorus asked, incredulous. “Like you stopped them at Danu?”

“Like I stopped Lord Douro at Vorgossos,” I said, glowering at the androgyn. I returned my attention to the floor.

I took a shuddering, rattling breath.

It was time.

“There is a weapon,” I said, “on board *Demiurge* . . . capable of destroying Gododdin’s sun.”

“What?” Selene was aghast.

But the Emperor was calm. “You propose to use it.”

“If the Cielcin bring the brunt of their fleet to bear here,” I said, “at Gododdin. Yes.”

Silence then. Light and darkness.

Doctor Vrabel was staring at me, white faced, frozen.

“How does it work?” The Emperor’s voice was calm, cold. The gold mask was locked on my face, its eyes black holes.

“I don’t know *how it works*,” I said. “What it *does* is create a singularity inside itself by *folding space*.”

“You’ve tested this weapon?” asked the Emperor.

“No,” I said. “It will destroy itself when used.”

“How convenient,” said Nicephorus.

“What about the people?” Selene asked. “On the planet?”

The old familiar knot tied itself in my stomach. “We have to continue our evacuation efforts,” I said. “But we won’t save them all.”

The princess drew away a step. “That’s why you were pushing the evacuation so hard,” she said. “You’ve been . . . planning for this.”

I nodded. “There are more than fifteen hundred Cielcin worldships in the whole armada . . .” Memory of Danu washed over me, the sky filled with alien warships vast as moons. “If the whole of their fleet comes here, Gododdin is dead no matter what happens. If a single one of their vessels falls out of orbit, the planet is done. If we destroy one of their ships too close to Gododdin, the planet is done.” I looked to Selene, to her father. “We must assume Gododdin is lost already.”

His Imperial Radiance nodded wearily. “I saw the reports from Danu,” he said. One of the worldships we had destroyed in the fighting there had already decayed from its orbit by the time our scouts arrived to see the aftermath.

The planet had been reduced to slag, a molten glede held together by its own gravity.

And yet we could not have done nothing, for nothing, surely, was more evil than what we had done . . .

. . . what I would do.

Must do.

“This is why you tried to lure them here,” the Emperor said. “Why you gave away our location.” I looked out over the banked nuclear weapons, each a great lance in its rack. “Can you do it?”

I did not have to say yes. I did not have to say anything.

“The weapon’s outer casing is a kind of highmatter,” I said. “It can survive sun’s heat and pressure a long time. Once the casing is destroyed, the singularity is released. The stellar mass it absorbs stabilizes the singularity before it can dissolve. After that, it is only a matter of time before the change in local density precipitates core collapse.”

“A supernova,” the Emperor said, voiced hush.

Nicephorus cleared its throat. “And the Monumentals?”

It was a relief to speak freely at last, after so many months—and indeed years surrounded by Alexander’s men and the Chantry. But there, in the

bowels of the world, on far Cynon, we were alone at last. So deep underground, there was no chance of our signal being intercepted.

“They will be destroyed.”

The Emperor’s good right hand made a fist against his knee. His head was bowed. Atlas he seemed to me then, that doomed titan, condemned forever to hold up the world. “Then we must do it,” he said at last.

“There’s more,” I said. “It will be necessary for a portion of the fleet to remain behind. We must give the Watchers and the Cielcin both as little warning as may be.”

Nicephorus cursed. “You want to . . . sacrifice the armada?”

“A portion of it,” I said. “Our ships are smaller, faster to make the jump to warp. But if we escape the system too early, give them time—”

“They may discover what we have done,” said the Emperor.

“Dorayaica may itself escape,” I said. “It is . . . one of them now, or nearly so.”

The golden mask swiveled to face me. “One of the Monumentals?”

I nodded, turned away. “If it survives, it will rally whatever of its people are not killed in the firestorm. If it knows the telegraphs are compromised, the Cielcin will disappear. *All of them.*” My hands seized the rail, and I squeezed until I thought the metal must warp beneath my fingers. “This is our chance, William. Our *one* chance.”

I did not hear him stand, felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Then we’ll take it,” he said.

He was standing right behind me. Selene held his prisoned arm.

“Your girl asked me why I brought you here,” he said, turning his head to acknowledge Cassandra’s stoic presence. “It was not to see these weapons—though they are part of the reason we are *here*, at Gododdin, to be sure . . .” He swayed where he stood. “There is something I must show you . . .”

CHAPTER 66

THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

WE MADE SLOW PROGRESS, the five of us—accompanied by a quartet of the Knights Excubitor and a trio of androgyns, along with Doctor Vrabel and his assistants—through the round portal from the overlook into a long tunnel circular in cross-section and lit by arcing sections of the ceiling. The bunker was an extensive warren of tunnels and lifts, a place whose full depth and scope I would never learn.

“We have hundreds of these installations distributed across the Empire,” His Radiance said. “Officially, the stockpiles were for use against outside threats.”

“And unofficially?” asked Cassandra.

“Unofficially . . .” The Emperor stopped to rest, leaning on his left arm like a crutch. “Unofficially, they guarantee the peace. The Imperial House has at its disposal more atomic weapons than all the other houses combined.” He resumed his march, a rude beast in Imperial white and scarlet, stomping down the hall, his prosthesis striking the floor with every odd step. “It was believed that such an arsenal would keep the other princes in line. If any general revolt could be met with nuclear annihilation . . .”

Beside its liege, Nicephorus said, “Mutually assured destruction.”

“As the Mericanii used to say,” said His Radiance. “This is but one part of our power—in a sense the least . . .”

As we continued our descent, he spoke of how the network had been established by Alexander Haemogenesis, son of Sebastian the Great, who had ended the Kin Wars and established the practice of producing the Imperial heirs in artificial wombs. It was that Sebastian who first had the cadet branches of the Imperial House sterilized, and who re-engineered the succession, ending the practice of unsexed primogeniture, replacing it with

selection process that persists to this day: with the heir to the throne decided by the Emperor, with concessions made to all the powers that be.

That Alexander had been the first Emperor born of blood—hence his name—the first to mature in the tanks. Sebastian had passed over six natural-born sons to select the prince, whom it was said at the time was a clone of his father.

“Sebastian and Alexander both used the nuclear arsenals to bend the lesser princes in line,” William said. “Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Bourbon . . . Otranto. All submitted to sterilization. The survival of their houses depended on the tanks, which my house provided.” We had reached another lift. “By the time the palatine caste was formally constituted under Cyrus II, every one of the great houses had bent to our will.”

The lift carried us down at an angle, and when we emerged at the bottom, it was onto another long, straight corridor.

The lift doors sealed behind us, and a rush of air filled the hall with its deafening thunder. At once the Emperor’s prosthesis resumed making a sound each time it struck the floor, at once the cloaks of the three Imperials and Cassandra’s *mandyas* began to move properly.

“I must ask that you all maintain your suit integrity,” said His Radiance, when at last he reached the door. “Nicephorus, if you would.” The Emperor extended his gauntleted right hand to his servant and closest friend.

The Chamberlain advanced—one of its androgyns beside it—and found the seals that trapped William’s hand inside the glove. Gently, gingerly, Nicephorus removed the gauntlet, handed it to its subordinate; more gently still removed the red velvet glove beneath. The exposed flesh was scabrous, and a cyst had formed between thumb and forefinger.

The Emperor made a fist, faced the heavy door.

It was unlike any door that I had ever seen. It was round, like all the others in that place, but seemed formed all of leaves, of wedges like the segments of an orange—like the petals of a flower. There was a hole in the very center: a deep, black pit wide enough that a man might insert his arm to the elbow . . . which is precisely what the Emperor then did, and as he did, I heard the groan and clacking of mechanisms in the walls all round.

William gasped in pain, and Selene flinched, hands going to her dear father's shoulders.

Then he drew his arm free.

The door began to open, segments all retracting, retreating from the center like rays of light cast by the Emperor's arm. *He* had been the key, I understood. The door had been coded to his blood, his imprint. But how? When this place had been untouched for thousands of years?

As if in answer to my question, the Emperor said, "Earlier, I told you that we have hundreds of these installations scattered across the galaxy. They are all arrayed via telegraph, every one of them synchronized."

"*Noyn jitat*," said Cassandra.

The cost involved in such a venture, in the pair production of entangled particles in numbers sufficient to maintain such a network . . . and more than the cost, the *time* required to build such a network . . .

"How many nodes?" I asked. "How many bunkers?"

"Nine hundred eighty-nine," said the Emperor, crossing the threshold.

"What do you use them for?" I followed the Emperor into the chamber as ancient lanterns flared once more to life, and the great bank of computers shone to greet us, monitor after monitor blinking to life like so many eyes.

The chamber behind the final door was roughly semicircular—the curving arc of wall before us was shallower than a perfect arc, and covered with displays.

"What is all this?" Selene asked.

The Emperor advanced on the bank of consoles, stood at the epicenter of their curve, his bare hand tight on the head of his cane.

"William?"

His Radiance stirred, and looking back, raised his bare arm for us to see. "The keys to the kingdom," he said, and limped toward the console, where an ancient chair awaited him. He sank into it, and raising his exposed limb, said, "Nicephorus."

The androgyn advanced to restore the glove and gauntlet, and as it did so, William explained, "The strength of *my Imperium* is not counted in

legions, or in missiles . . . but in this.” He held up his hand: shaking, scabrous, febrile. “In blood.”

I did not then understand him, though I ought to have done.

“We stopped sterilizing the nobility after the creation of the palatine caste,” the Emperor said. “After the modifications were made, the lesser lords could not bear children without risk of serious defect. That was better than sterilization.”

“You did it . . . deliberately?” I said, aghast. I thought of the impediment that fact of my life and biology had been all my life, a barrier that had made Cassandra’s life almost impossible.

The Emperor—his gauntlet restored—dismissed Nicephorus, who drew back. “On Old Earth, it was common practice for kings and emperors to hold the sons and daughters of their enemies hostage,” he said. “We simply hold them hostage before they are ever born. Since the system was first implemented, there have been *no* revolutions, no attempts to overthrow my house.”

“Except for the Jaddians,” said Cassandra, clutching the stump of her arm.

William’s gold-masked face dipped in acknowledgement. “The Jaddians got ahold of their *key*. A critical error on the part of my ancestors.” He smoothed his coat over his knee, upset his cane. It clattered to the floor, and one of the little androgyns scurried to retrieve it. “Thank you, Erasmus.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“There are fewer than a hundred people in the Imperium who know this room exists,” William said. “Most of them died with the Eternal City . . . and I will die *soon*.”

“Father—” Selene took a step toward him.

William raised his cane to halt her advance. “I may not live to see the attack,” he said, not lowering his arm. “It is imperative that you understand what is at stake here.”

“The keys to the kingdom,” I said, echoing His Radiance’s words. “The *genetic* keys?”

The Emperor extended a finger, pointed at the displays. “Every palatine

genome. From every house. From every generation.”

“The genomes themselves?” I asked, looking on in wonder. “They’re all stored here?”

“And in parallel in every other bunker on the network,” William answered. “Alongside the codes to sequence the RNA retrovirals that will clean the genomes of each constellation.”

I turned away, reeling, looked to the door. Every life, every family, every constellation . . . each a gleaming thread bound to the Emperor’s own hand. “And the door is coded to *your* genome.”

“To me personally,” he said. “To my blood, yes. But also to my biometric data. The nodes cannot be accessed without me, personally. Had we attempted to force the door, this whole node would have destroyed itself.”

Cassandra made an impressed sound. “This is why the Chantry hasn’t killed you.”

The Emperor did not move.

“You must have backups,” I said. “Emperors have been killed before. The whole palatine system didn’t fail.”

William looked at Nicephorus then a long moment. Neither the man nor the androgyn spoke. At once the mantle on my shoulders weighed more heavily, as though its fibers were lead. I shut my eyes. “Of course,” I said. “That’s why we’re here.”

“You are Auctor of the Imperium,” William said, and turned his golden face upon Selene. “And you must rule after me.”

The princess blanched. “Me?” She drew back a step. “Empress? Father, I . . .”

“Alexander betrayed me,” the Emperor said. “Matthias is his lackey. The others are not here. You alone have stayed by me in these final days.”

Selene bent where she stood, a look of numb horror on her face. I had to suppress the instinct to go to her, even when she fell to her knees on the chamber floor. “Empress . . .” she said again. “I . . . Father, I can’t.”

“You must,” he said. “There is no other.”

“Titus is on Avalon!” she objected. “Frozen. And Max! Mother always

said you were saving them in case Aurelian should—”

“Selene . . .” Caesar’s voice was gentle.

“What about Michael? You sent him to Shakespeare with Mother!”

Nicephorus interjected. “Michael is dead.”

“What?” Her eyes were like liquid emeralds. “Michael? No. No . . . what about George? Arthur? Victoria?”

“All dead,” said His Radiance. “They were on Forum.”

“Faustinus? Flavia?”

“Selene.”

“You would have me be Empress by *default*?” she said. “Not because I’d be suited for it, but because I’m *here*?” She shook her head, screwed shut her eyes with fury. “I have *never* wanted the throne, Father. I am not trained!”

“Selene!” The Emperor turned a knob on his chest, boosting his gain. “There is no one but you!” He looked to Nicephorus, who might have been carved from stone. Then slowly, inexorably, like a statue of Jove himself come steadily to life, his head turned to regard *me*. “But you need not rule alone.”

My heart was in my mouth. Selene looked at me, and I could feel Cassandra’s eyes on the back of my head. I knew what was coming—what must come.

Valka, forgive me.

The cage snapped shut at last. The net had fallen, the noose drawn tight. My eyes never left Selene’s face. It is her face I remember, when I remember that moment. Not the bunker. Not the dying Emperor with his golden face. Not the banks of monitors displaying their constant updates and reports.

Her face. Her eyes.

The terror that had her in its grip.

That terror lessened then, at the sound of her father’s voice. *You need not rule alone . . .*

The poor girl looked at me—tears unfallen in those eyes wide as pools—and she *smiled*. By all the stars in heaven, she *smiled* at me, and I felt my

heart break to see how the Emperor's pronouncement comforted her. The relief she felt was like a wave, like the tide overtaking me, and I might have buckled.

She's only Tavrosi. The words were like a knell. *Only Tavrosi. Only Tavrosi.*

William's words were like the tolling of bells, ringing their changes to change the world. "You will wed," he said, "and join our houses."

A noise escaped Selene then. A laugh. A sob? A shudder of relief? "Yes," she said, and smiled again, and looked at me. "Yes."

I had forgotten to move, forgotten to speak.

Imperial Consort . . . The words redounded in my brain. *Emperor in all but name.*

Was I not that already? Was it truly so great a change?

Cassandra was still looking at me. "I—" My mouth was unaccountably dry. Selene had taken half a step toward me. I knew I could not refuse. Selene must rule, and she could not rule alone.

Imperial. Consort.

I felt a hand upon my shoulder, and flinching, found Cassandra standing there, not a pace away. "Abba," she said gently, and I knew she smiled.

"Anaryan."

Cassandra's hand turned, spurred me toward the princess.

"All right," I said. "I will."

Another shuddering laugh escaped Selene, and she closed the space between us.

Unseen, I shut my eyes, felt the princess's hand in mine.

"There will be time for ceremony later," the Emperor said. "But I will have your vows now."

"What?" Selene pulled back, and opening my eyes, I saw her looking up at me in wonder and fear alike. "Here?"

"Selene, daughter," the Emperor said. "Will you here take Lord Marlowe for your husband?"

She did not hesitate. "I will."

There was hardly time to react, hardly time for thought. I had not come

to that place, to the bowels of that dead world, expecting to be wed—and in secret—in the secret heart of Imperial power. But it was happening, and happened.

I looked at her, at the Princess Selene, who was so gentle, and kind, and good.

She needed me.

Her hand was still in mine.

“Lord Marlowe,” the Emperor intoned, voice grave as stone, “will you here take my daughter, Selene, for you wife?”

I did not hear my answer, but I must have then consented, for the princess embraced me, her head against my chest. I felt that dreadful weight again, the weight of my mantle dragging me downward, and was aware that every star and every planet in man’s Imperium turned in that moment about us both.

“The Princess Selene of the Aventine House,” said her father then, and struck the floor with his prosthesis once, twice, three times—as though he were the lictor and it his fasces, “and consort.”

Consort . . .

Valka forgive me.

“Consort . . .” Selene’s voice was scarce more than a whisper.

I still held her, despite myself. My limbs were turned to stone. To steel.

My . . . wife.

“When I am gone, the keys will pass to you.” He looked to me as he spoke—not to his daughter. “Hadrian.” The Emperor’s voice was harsh, racked with pain. “You must finish what we have begun. The Cielcin. The Chantry. The Monumentals. The machines . . .” His prosthesis struck the floor as he swayed, conjuring Nicephorus and Vrael both to his side. He forestalled them with his cane, wielding it as a prefect might his mace. “An Emperor should be a father to his people. What manner of father am I that I have left so many dangers still alive?”

Slowly, very slowly, I extricated myself from the arms of my wife, advanced upon the man who had just made himself my father—the third I had ever known. He was dying, had been dying for decades, and for

perhaps longer. Dying of a disease he had contracted ministering to his sick children. I went to one knee before him—not as a soldier, but as a son. “You are, I think, the best man I have ever known,” I told him.

He made a choking sound, and behind that golden mask, I knew the pharaonic mask he always wore had broken, and that a sob had wracked that man above men. “A father must be more than a man to his children,” said he. “An Emperor even more so.”

“No,” I said, and hand upon his, felt the weakness there, beneath the armor. I was very conscious of Cassandra’s presence then, for whose sake I had spared the universe entire, when I might have shattered all to spare my pain. “A father must be a man, *and* more.”

“Save them, Hadrian,” William said. “All of them. If you can.”

“I will,” I said, and realized that I, myself, was weeping. “I can.”

“Father . . .” Selene’s voice was choked, and as she knelt, I withdrew, permitting my wife to embrace the old and dying Son of Earth.

• • •

In time, we departed the bunker and returned to the surface. The Martians were already at their labors, had already opened the bay doors in the crater’s floor. Missiles blazoned with the emblem of the Empire of Earth and Sun were rising on repulsors into the sky, floating as if in freefall, each a link in a great chain connecting heaven and earth.

We had gone ahead of the Emperor, who had insisted on remaining behind to discuss matters with Commander Gannon and Captain Rice. The bombs would need to be distributed across the fleet, the armada made ready for the battle to come.

“Can you really do it?” Selene asked, stopping on the strand between the massive doors and the gold-and-black dragon that was the Imperial yacht. “Destroy the sun?”

I could see the dome of the throne room where the Emperor had

confronted Alexander and broken the power of the Chantry, watched the nuclear arsenal spiraling smoothly into the air in a great helix. "I can."

"And stop the Cielcin?"

"Yes."

Selene seemed to accept this. She swallowed. "They'll blame me for it," she said. "All those people."

"They'll blame me," I said. The obscene icon I had seen painted on the walls of Catraeth floated in my mind. "They'll say you're my puppet. And worse."

The Devil sits his throne.

"I don't care," she said, and drew near me, eyes very wide again. "Hadrian, we have to save them. Everyone we can."

"I know," I told her. "We will."

"By force if we have to."

"I know," I said again, and despite myself, I drew her close, and held her in the eyes of those there gathered.

My wife, I thought, and my mind rebelled. *My wife*.

I had only ever called Valka by that name, and then only after she was gone.

Valka, forgive me.

We broke apart then, and walked then hand in hand, Cassandra close behind. I saw her shadow on the brutal concrete, like an angel with one wing. I saw her shadow falter, fall behind.

I stopped, turned, saw her standing then ten paces behind.

"What is to become of me?" she asked. "There will be other children. They won't let me near the throne."

"Cassandra . . ." Selene raised a hand.

"I am nothing to them," she said in Jaddian, hoping to cut Selene from the conversation. "A bastard in their eyes."

"Don't say that!" I said, and closed the gap between us. Where had I erred, that she should feel so bereft? "You are what you have always been," I said, and laid my hands upon her shoulders. Neither one could see the other's face. "You are my daughter, and you always will be."

She raised her head.

“I need you now, dear girl,” I said, “more than ever.” I let both my hands float between us then, palms raised for her to take. “Will you help me see this to its end?”

She took my hand in hers, and I closed her one between my two, and held it tight.

“Yes, Abba. Always.” Her voice broke. Her head fell. And I drew her to myself.

Selene would have the Empire, I thought. And our children after her. But Cassandra was mine—is mine, wherever she may be—and all I am and have is hers.

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CHAPTER 67

THE RETURN

I DID NOT SEE my wife then for several weeks. Our return to Gododdin's orbit was accompanied by a public address regarding the opening and distribution of the old atomic arsenal. No reference was made to our secret wedding, or to the Emperor's private proclamation of Selene as heir. I delivered the address myself, at the Emperor and Lord Nicephorus's urging. The long march through the bunker had pushed the Emperor too far, and he spent the long flight back from Cynon to Gododdin in a tank. Not in stasis, but floating, like a palatine babe, eating through a tube in the mask that helped him breathe, communicating via subvocalization through the same console that had helped him communicate while in true stasis.

Vrabel never left his side, nor did the trio of scholiasts that assisted the Jewish doctor. The little man slept on a couch in the Imperial apartments, seemed hardly to eat or sleep.

I became the Emperor's public face once more. I sat in his place in council, relayed his words to his ministers and his servants, gave orders to his captains, his legates, his strategoi. Amon Kosis—alone of the three triumvirs—had retained his position and his freedom, having renewed his oath to the Emperor and the Imperial House. To depose him or humiliate him was to risk alienating at least a portion of the Martian Guard, and the Martians formed the core of his personal guard and army. The Excubitors might have been closer to him, but they were so few in number, and though new ones had already been decanted to replace the ones dead in Catraeth, one hundred eight were as nothing measured against the quarter million Martians at Kosis's command.

I had been sent to do a thing: to hand down judgment upon the Cielcin from the Absolute's high seat. I had the means: *Demiurge*, *Astrophage*—but

with every passing day I felt myself more compromised. I had not come to entrench myself in Imperial politics, had disavowed all politics when I hurled my commendations at the feet of Prince Aurelian what seemed now ten thousand years before. Yet there I was, dressed in the auctor's black and white, seated at the head of the Imperial Council, husbanded to the very princess I had spent my life rejecting—and though she would have nothing of me, we were then as close as we had ever been.

Alexander was a prisoner aboard *Aurora*, kept on ice alongside Matthias. Tarquin and his brothers and sisters of the Chantry's Inner Order were trapped on Gododdin. And William was dying, a prisoner in his own failing flesh.

Could I abandon the Empire, the *Emperor*—and Selene—in that hour of greatest need?

Could I do the Absolute's will and *not* remain?

I could not, and so rededicated myself to the fight, despite the treachery, despite the knives inching closer then on every side. I knew that if I remained, if I took the seat beside the highest seat in all man's little *cosmos*, I would be surrounded by enemies all my days.

I had never wanted it.

Whom shall I send? the Quiet had asked me, speaking from within his egg. *If not you?*

I had no answer. Was it the Quiet's will—the will of the Absolute—that I should rule?

He had shown me myself as Emperor, but so had Ushara. What was I to make of that fact? I had thought the Absolute had shown me that vision as a warning, but I was no longer sure. Selene needed me—that much was plain. The Empire needed me. The Cielcin must be destroyed, and more than the Cielcin. The Chantry . . . and indeed the Empire itself. I had to die that new life might live, as a forest dies in the conflagration and so becomes a new forest.

Like the simurgh. Like the phoenix.

And so, I rededicated myself to the war effort. To our preparations.

Of those preparations, I shall say no more. You well understand what

was at stake, what yet remained to be done. Indeed, I might pass over all the trivia that remains, leap to that accounting which you began this journey with me to read: with the Cielcin screaming out of space at last, their ships like a hail of worlds to end the worlds of men.

The final battle.

But here I hesitate—one last time—for one last thing:

• • •

“Deep-space telemetry on the borders of Tenba system detected what they believe to be the Cielcin fleet passing the system to galactic west,” I said, reciting from the emergency report Strategos Amata Rempel had broadcast earlier that day. Neema had roused me in the night for an emergency meeting, shaking me from the dream. I had taken the meeting via holograph, seated in a compartment on board *Aurora*.

Selene was waiting for me outside, seated against the opposite wall beneath a painting depicting the reconquest of London by the God Emperor’s forces.

“How long?” Her eyes were narrow, her jaw tight. Neema stood beside her, dressed in a Jaddian dishdasha of Marlowe black—he looked almost like a Chantry priest, with his shaved head and drooping mustachios.

“Weeks,” I said.

“We’ll never evacuate the planet,” she said.

“No.”

It was quiet in the Imperial apartments. Golden shadows drowned we three, cast by jeweled lamps in the walls and ceiling. Seldom had I known so deep a silence, or so pregnant.

It was even less time than we’d believed we’d had.

“We should . . . clear the system,” I said at last. “At this point, it’s more important that the orbital lanes be cleared than anything else.”

Selene—my wife, *my wife*—sat a little straighter. She was clad in white.

The high collar of her robe was ermine flecked with black. “There are still millions of people on the planet.”

“As many as a billion,” I said.

“We cannot do nothing!”

“And we cannot let the Cielcin catch us flat-footed!” I countered.

Selene stood, caught my wrist, and I felt my next remarks all die before they could be born. She was looking at me, eyes twin malachites, hard and cold. “One more week,” she said. “One more week . . . we save as many as we can.”

Should I have felt more horror? More desperation? Perhaps. But the enormity of what I intended—of what was to come—defied all attempts at comprehension. The star of Gododdin shone through a porthole at my left, so remote I might have blotted it from my sight with an outstretched hand.

“The choice is still your father’s,” I said, an image of the Emperor at Perfugium flickering like thunder in my mind: his shoulders hunched, his hands gripping the rim of the holograph projector as he endured, holding out for one last wave of refugees.

Selene shook her head. “He’ll do it, if we ask him to.”

I saw the Empress she might become once more in that moment—the Empress she might have been. The Imperial mettle was in her, but was no metal at all. Like her father, she seemed to me: a figure of stone, not steel, long-suffering. Her life had been a test of patience, of potential unrealized . . . would forever be. I loved her as a poet might, as an abstraction, as a symbol of love itself. She loved her people, though they mocked and degraded her.

She wore no powder then. No charcoal. No paint. There were dark shadows beneath those lovely eyes, and pain in every line of her perfect face, like the image of a saint in stained glass already cracked by the slings of the iconoclast.

What mother—if she is to truly *be* a mother—does not sacrifice all of herself for her children? Does not ultimately sacrifice her children to the world by sending them from herself? Her Empire would never be, would not escape the womb, but still she fought for it, and the shadow of what it

might have been may yet be felt in the lives of those last people to leave Gododdin alive.

“Then we’ll ask him,” I said at last.

• • •

Three days passed—not even—before the alarms sounded, all across the fleet. Every ship rang with the blare of klaxons, every hall and chamber, every bridge and engine room and engineering office brimmed with red light.

“Contact! Contact! Contact!” cried the comms officer as I shouldered my way onto *Aurora*’s bridge. “We have warp reversion out beyond the orbit of Cynon.”

“Telegraph relay estimates six light-hours distance!” said the tac officer—an ethnic Martian with a face like weathered stone. “Estimated reversion T-plus twenty-eight minutes.”

“Cielcin?” asked Martian Captain Rice, his Corinthian helmet on the console before him.

“There’s an image, sir,” said the comms officer. “Estimated ten minutes to compile. Processing on telegraph channel five . . .” The man paused, checked the various display panels on the bank before him. “Ship’s big, Class-9, possibly Class-10.”

Captain Adar Rice rose from his chair, the better to oversee the men on the bridge, his white cape floating after him in the still air.

“It’s not Cielcin,” I said.

Commander Gannon—second-in-command aboard *Aurora*—turned to look at me. “How can you be sure?”

“The Cielcin would not have emerged from warp in the heliopause,” I said. “And they wouldn’t do it alone.” Class-10 put the ship at more than twice the size of the greatest Imperial dreadnought. We were not looking at a worldship—whatever it was. A converted asteroid, perhaps, or a vessel

made of more than one such asteroid bolted together. “And they’re too soon. It’s not three days since our sensors at Tenba flagged their wake.”

“Then who is it?” Rice asked.

“Scouts say it looks Extrasolarian,” said the tac officer.

“Have they hailed?” Rice asked.

A light was blinking on my wrist-terminal. In the stark light of the bridge, it hardly registered. *Extrasolarian*? Had the Prophet sent his Minoan slaves?

Assuming the new arrival had broadcast a hail the instant it arrived in-system, the scout ship—by chance nearly thirty light-minutes from the vessel’s location, six light-hours from our own—could have received it by now, but it had been less than a minute since the vessel had first appeared on sensors. If the newcomers had taken any time to evaluate their position, they might not have hailed at all.

The light on my wrist kept flashing, seemed not to matter in that moment, for that moment. Whatever it was would wait.

“I want positive ident on that ship,” said Rice. “Order the scouts to hail. Scramble the Cynon division, have them prepare to intercept.”

“Still no hail from the newcomer,” said the comms officer.

“Were the scouts able to get a name off the hull?”

“If they did, they left it out of their transmission.”

“Send query.”

“Querying.”

Nervous then, I looked at my wrist. Froze.

It was Edouard.

That didn’t make sense. Edouard was aboard *Demiurge*.

I turned my back on the bridge, tapped the comm patch behind my right ear.

“Edouard?” I had to wait a couple seconds for the transmission to lag.

“Hadrian,” came the reply. What he said next stopped me sure as any bolt of lightning, and I forgot to respond. “Hadrian? Hadrian, do you copy?”

“I . . . yes, Edouard, I copy,” I said. I looked up, looked round at the

Martians crowding the warship's bridge, at the world beyond the forward windows, at *Aurora* like a city of black towers capped with gold. It struck me then that the men about me all were strangers. Selene was with her father, and Cassandra with Neema, somewhat behind.

But I was not alone.

"What is it?" Commander Gannon must have seen something of the emotion on my face.

The shock. The delight. The relief.

He had heard me, and answered. Had answered, when he might have turned his back. He had hailed us the moment he arrived in system, I realized, but he had not broadcast to the system as a whole. He'd appeared near enough to make his presence known, but far out enough to respond to any potential hostility before it could reach him. He'd no time to wait for light delay, for his signal to lag across the system.

He had used the telegraph.

He had my contact, after all.

"Tell the scouts to stand down."

"What is it?" Rice asked. "Who is it?"

"It's . . ." I could hardly say the name. "It's *Mistwalker*," I said at last. "It's Commandant General Aristedes."

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CHAPTER 68

THE GOOD COMMANDER

IT WAS AGREED THAT we should meet upon Gododdin, far from the ruins of Catraeth, far from civilization. The Martians conducted their surveys, picked the spot.

The *Llurug Planum*.

The vast tableland rose nearly a mile above the riverlands of the southern continent, relic of a hundred million years of erosion. Once—so the planetologists said—it had been the lowest part of the surrounding country. It had become the highest, towering over a wilderness of wild plantings and little rivers.

It was there we made our bivouac, meeting as men beneath the light of Gododdin's mirrored sun—my sun—one last time. Nigh all the lords of men were there, those that remained: Sollan and Jaddian, Mandari and Nipponese, Durantine and Norman and the kings of the Small Kingdoms.

The Emperor was there, his yacht buttressed by a dozen frigates, each carrying a full complement of the Martian Guard. Three legions. These were arrayed at the very center of the tableland, with the Jaddians opposite in pride of place, forming a kind of parade ground, a plaza between them.

I had returned to *Demiurge* before making the descent, taking Neema and Cassandra with me—leaving Selene with her father. Our marriage was a secret thing, a thing not to be shared with the broader universe—not yet. Caesar had yet to make his revised will known, had not declared her his heir, and would not, not before the breaking of the world.

And so it was I came to High Llurug upon *Ascalon*, with one of *Demiurge*'s black ships following in our wake. Cassandra rode with me, and we were not alone.

The trumpets rang their silver song as we emerged into the light of the

sun, and Cassandra raised her voice and declared that *the Lord Shadow, Hadrian Marlowe, Auctor of the Imperium* had come!

Edouard walked behind me, at my left where Cassandra was at my right, his black uniform neatly ordered, his hair combed and freshly oiled, the cross of his faith worn openly upon his breast. Behind them came Neema, his head bowed, his hands hidden in flowing sleeves, and behind him came Annaz and two dozen of my Irchtani, while the rest—alongside the men of HAPSIS and those few Sabrathans who had survived the Battle of Danu—emerged from the black ship. They formed their ranks behind me, human and Irchtani, and together we crossed the makeshift plaza—lined with Imperial banners on staves twice the height of a man—to the Imperial pavilion, where the lords and captains of Empire stood waiting beneath the great pillars that held up the cobalt dome and gilded stars of the empyrean.

William had chosen to suit himself once more, had donned Vrabel's exoskeleton and the heavy prosthesis. Selene stood beside him, dressed in white, her bare arms gold-banded, her flaming hair secured by a net of golden chains. She alone smiled to see me.

As auctor, I was not expected to kneel. Still, I went to one knee as a soldier, and at a sign from the Emperor, rose and took my place at the dais, while my men found theirs among the courtiers. I spied golden-haired Alphonse Bourbon among them, caught him glaring.

It was not long before the very air began to tremble, atoms vibrating to the presence of the repulsors that carried the Latarran ship to ground. Beneath the false sky of the pavilion, I could not see it, not until it lowered itself onto the yard outside.

The ship was like a tower falling, overshadowing the Imperial vessel and the Jaddian ones. It was the same ship Lorian had ridden down when he came to Forum before the assault upon Vorgossos. Like a massive egg it was, stark white and smooth of hull, save where the tripod legs extended—huge as houses—flaking off pieces of the outer shell.

Then the mighty gates were opened, and the ramp came down.

I recognized the Latarran livery, black and gold. Had my old friend returned to Latarra, conquered it for himself?

But no, the solar falcon that Calen Harendotes had taken for his sigil was no more upon their breasts, had been stripped from their hod helmets. In its place was nothing: bare black. The dragoons formed ranks, broke apart as their masters appeared on the gangway. I recognized them at once: Harred and Gadkari, and red-haired Tolten—so like to one of the Imperial blood. The Commandant Generals of the Latarran Monarchy . . .

. . . those of Imperial descent, at least.

And there he was, last of all and greatest—though the least in stature.

He was as I had seen him on the holograph in the wake of the carnage above the profane planet, save that he had removed the monarch's falcon pin from his peaked cap. He carried his cane in the crook of his arm, and I marked the braids and commendations on his breast that had not been there before. When he was five paces from the base of the dais, he raised his hand in salute.

"Radiant Majesty," he said, "I am Lorian Aristedes, Supreme Commandant of Latarra, Grand Admiral of Roundtable Fleet, First-Among-Equals of the Free Captains of the same, Captain of the Starship *Mistwalker*, a veteran of Almatana, Ceuta, and Eragassa, where I bested the Cielcin General Teyanu, one of the Prophet's own." He did not bow.

This pronouncement sent a shockwave through the court, set the lords to muttering.

"The traitor?" I heard one say.

"I heard he escaped the Imperial prison on Belusha . . ."

"Wasn't he one of Marlowe's?"

"—an intus!"

"Extrasolarian swine—"

"I was your servant, once!" Lorian said. "No longer. But I have come at the behest of one once dear to me, to aid you and your Empire against our *common enemy*." His eyes found me as he spoke.

Behind the diminutive admiral stood a cavalcade of junior officers, a motley collection of posthuman mutants and chimeric warriors. I recognized his first officer, the towering Amatorre, and the hermaphrodite

that called itself Anat. The eyes of the helmets worn by the Latarran dragoons shone eerily in the golden shadow of the pavilion, like stars.

The Emperor raised his good right hand, and quelled the tide of murmurs. Speaking in his halting, rasping way, voice artificially amplified, Caesar said, "We welcome you, Supreme Commandant, and welcome your aid. It is many years since Perfugium."

"Since Belusha, do you mean?" said Lorian, raising his chin.

"We well remember," said His Radiance, "and remember you."

"I delight to hear it," said Lorian, and though he seemed a child before the throne, he was not overshadowed.

"You did us loyal service, once," said the Emperor. "We welcome your aid now, and that of the Latarran people."

"Latarra is no more!" said Lorian. He was a giant then, in all but fact, an accusing finger pointed at the throne. "Our people were twice betrayed. Once by our own king, who used us for his own selfish ends, and once by your Imperium!" He looked once more at me. "We were allies, and when victory over Vorgossos was ours, you turned on us."

The Emperor knew all that had passed at the Battle of Vorgossos, what Kedron and Douro had done. "Those who betrayed you acted without our authority. Rest assured: They have been punished."

"Does that include Lord Marlowe?" asked Lorian, looking at me for a third time. "I see him stood among you."

I might have answered him myself, but said nothing. I would not be dragged into so public a confrontation.

"Lord Marlowe acted of himself," said His Radiance, "as he has always done."

To my surprise, that seemed to mollify the Supreme Commandant. Lorian's head drooped. The words he had spoken at the start took on a new sharpness then. *I have come at the behest of one once dear to me.*

"Lorian." I did speak then, and before I knew it, I was moving, pushing my way past the Excubitors to stand before the little man. I embraced him. "I did not think you would come."

The smaller man raised his hands, brushed mine from his shoulders.

“Neither did I,” said he. “But here I am.”

“What happened?” I asked. “What has become of Latarra?”

The Commandant’s face fell. “Ashes,” he said, and drew back, reimposing a formal distance. “The monarchy is no more. Without Harendotes, the factions tore one another apart. Lord Black was dead by the time we returned from Vorgossos. What you see”—he raised his hands, as if lifting every one of his retinue on his shoulders—“is what remains.”

I looked at the others, marked Gadkari, Harred, and Tolten. They had each been Commandants-General in the Grand Army of Latarra, notably each of Imperial extraction. The four of them must have formed a faction following the collapse of the Harendotes regime. “The Roundtable Fleet?”

The little man smiled. “Some legends never die.”

“Gone mercenary, have you?”

“I fight for the right,” said Lorian. “Same as you.”

“Thank you,” I said, “for coming.”

The good commander nodded stiffly. “I have business with Dorayaica.”

“Vengeance,” I said.

“Justice.” Lorian raised his chin, his voice. “Fire for the Cielcin! That is what we have brought!”

The Emperor spoke then. “We are glad to receive it,” he said. “But at what cost?”

“Only what was promised!” Lorian said. “Peace hereafter between our peoples! Recognition of the Roundtable as the legitimate government of the Norman stars.”

“Outrageous!” shouted one of the strategoi. “You would seize all of Norma!”

“It is ours already!” Lorian said, and raised a hand to the throne, palm up in imprecation and token of peace. “You promised the expanse to Calen Harendotes. We hold that territory now by right of arms. We ask only for peace.”

“You would buy an arm of the galaxy with thirteen ships?” asked Leonid Bartosz, sneering.

“Each of our ships is worth a hundred of yours,” said Tolten, and it was

not precisely true. A single Sojourner could outmatch an Imperial battle fleet, but not a hundred ships to one.

The Emperor raised his hand, and the fasces rang to summon silence. The golden face bent upon Lorian. “The Latarran monarchy is no more?”

“Latarra is no more,” he said again. “In this, we are the same.” He unslung his cane at last, tapped the stone floor. “I wept when I heard the Eternal City was destroyed. I served my lieutenancy in the Admiralty building . . .”

The Emperor nodded wearily. When he spoke, it was in a voice fragile as glass. “We thank you for your words, Lord Commandant . . .” His prosthesis *pinged* as he coughed, its end striking the side of the Solar Throne. “If we survive the coming fire, we will recognize the Roundtable’s claim to the Norman Expanse. You will have our support.”

Lorian straightened, drew himself up to his full height. He wore a ring upon his finger, I realized. A gold sovereign, such as the one the Emperor had given me. Whence had it come, I wondered? And what device did it bear?

I could not help but smile then, as I stood before my oldest, dearest friend—the last of my Red Company: a king in that moment, in all but name.

“Then we have an accord,” Lorian said, and gesturing to his fellows, to Tolten and Gadkari, to Harred and the rest, he said, “Many of us are sons of the Imperium . . .” He hesitated before adding. “Unwanted sons. We will fight with you. Not for you. But for ourselves. For our future, and the future of all mankind.”

The Emperor’s golden head drooped beneath its crimson hood. “For our future,” he agreed. “For all mankind.”

• • •

The men of Roundtable Fleet spent the next several days meeting with the Imperial Council, with Legion Intelligence, with the lords of man’s great

alliance. We discussed the ordering of our defenses and showed them our best projections of the Cielcin fleet's trajectory.

We knew our time was measured in weeks.

Lorian would not speak to me. He left each meeting in a rush, surrounded by his officers and his dragoons, only to return to their egg-shaped vessel. There was much he'd not been told, much that needed telling. About the Watchers, about the Chantry.

About Danu. About Earth.

Three days passed on Gododdin before I overtook him, finding him as he left one of the meeting rooms set aside for foreign diplomats aboard the Imperial yacht. He had surrounded himself with the usual cadre of faceless dragoons, and the giant, Amatorre, stood beside him. He turned as I cried out, "Lorian!"

Seeing me alone in the hall, he shut his eyes, face shadowed by the bill of his once-Latarran cap. Then reaching up, he laid a hand on the shoulder of the nearest dragoon, muttered a command. They dispersed as I approached, leaving the little man alone, his fist clenched round the haft of his cane. Only Amatorre lingered, tall and slender as one of the Cielcin, his hands elegant sculptures of ceramic white as bone.

Lorian did not look up as I approached.

"I know you had nothing to do with the attack that destroyed *Melancholia*," he said. "Killing Douro was justice."

"It was revenge," I said. "They got a team on board my ship. Kedron nearly killed Cassandra."

The tip of Lorian's cane found the travertine. "I see."

"They wanted you to attack me so I would have to respond," I said. "They wanted us both dead, and *Demiurge* for themselves."

"I understand that," he said, and looked up at me at last, and with a start I realized that his eyes were no longer his own. The once colorless, watery irises were pale gold. "What I do not understand is why you did not tell me the truth."

"The truth?" I asked, glancing round at the richly appointed hall, the

antique armor on display, the marble and porphyry. “Would you have believed it?”

Lorian turned away, clearly agitated, incredulous, and finding Amatorre still standing there, dismissed the giant with a gesture and word. The first officer withdrew, following after Lorian’s dragoons. When he returned his face to mine, it was with eyes narrowed: “I would have believed *you*.”

I could only shake my head. He was mistaken. We both knew it. He had believed the Latarran story with all his heart. It had made him what he was, had *remade* him in its image. Latarra had recognized his potential in a way the Empire never could, had helped him realize that potential—transformed the good commander into the Commandant General.

He could never have heard that story was based on a lie.

“When could I have told you?” I asked.

“You were in my *house*, Hadrian!” Lorian snapped. “More than once! You could have told me.”

“We were his prisoners, Lorian,” I said. “We were watched. Every word. Every day. Everywhere we went!”

“You could have found a way!” he said. One long finger found my face. “You must have told the Imperium *somehow*. You could have told me!”

“You’re right,” I said. “You’re right. I could have told you. But told you what? That your king was *Kharn Sagara*? That your whole state was part of his plan to retake Vorgossos for himself—from himself?”

Lorian stabbed the floor again. The noise of the impact was like a bell. He said nothing, ground his teeth.

I laid a hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. “Thank you,” I said. “For coming back. You can’t know all that’s happened here . . . happened since. I cannot do this alone.”

Those golden eyes narrowed. “I did not come back for you,” he said coldly, and turned away.

I wanted to tell him everything. About the plan. About *Astrophage*. About Selene. But I couldn’t. Not there. Not anywhere. Though Tarquin was condemned and Alexander on ice, the sons of Earth yet had their exponents, and the totality of William’s plan and mine could not be spoken

aloud—though it pained me. It was secrets that had shattered Lorian’s faith in me, and needs must that I keep secrets from him still.

“I know,” I said at last, and fell into step beside him, walking slowly to benefit the smaller man. We had not gone so much as a dozen paces when I asked, “What happened to your eyes?”

The Supreme Commandant ducked his head, fingers touching his cheek. “My . . . condition,” he said. “The collagen in my eyes was . . . starting to stretch.” He pointed at each eye as he spoke. “The retina detached in the left, and it got to where I couldn’t see past *here*”—he held his hand about a cubit from his face—“with the right. So I had them pulled.”

I felt a crawling horror and a pity at the thought of what that must have been like, knew Lorian would resent me for both feelings. “I’m sorry,” I said. Horror and pity gave way to anger, when I recalled what the Emperor had told me in the bunker on Cynon: that the tendency of the palatine to defects had been a feature, a deliberate choice on the part of the Aventine House—the better to control the feudal lords.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s all right,” said he. “We do what we have to do. I thought of getting new ones grown, but anything based on my blood would fail again before too long—we’re not as young as we used to be.” He halted as we passed a suit of blackened plate. “Well, *I’m* not.”

Anger gave way to guilt. That the Absolute should bless me as he had, restore me to life and youth—yet leave Lorian to languish in his failing body, or leave Cassandra with but one arm. Was that justice? Goodness? Was I right to trust in him?

“I told myself, when I joined the Extras, that I wouldn’t become like them,” Lorian said. “You’ve seen Amatorre, Captain Eidhin, and the rest. They’re still *people*—Empire’s wrong about that. But their lives aren’t lives I’d want to live. I don’t know who I’d be without this . . .” He tapped his withered chest, raised the hand that held his cane. “My *karma* for past sins . . . But I told myself that *she* had eyes like these, and they didn’t make her something she was not.”

“Valka?” I was surprised, touched, disturbed all at once. He had chosen

the color in her honor.

“She was a good woman, Hadrian,” said Lorian. “I know I don’t have to tell you that, but she was the . . . she was so kind. In her way. To me.” He blinked back tears, punched the lift controls. “You both were. Don’t think I’m ungrateful.”

“I don’t need your gratitude, Lorian,” I said. “You are my brother.”

The little man flinched at the word *brother*, grew stiff as stone. “It’s for her sake I’m here,” he said. “Hers, and my people’s.” The lift doors opened, and he crossed the threshold ahead of me.

I followed him, and when the lift had descended perhaps three levels, I said, “Cassandra met her, you know?”

“What?”

I knew the ship’s security would capture every word, but I no longer cared. “She died,” I said. “Cassandra, I mean. At Danu.” I saw her face again, disfigured by the monster in her mind. The leering eyes, the lolling tongue. I felt the blade pierce both our hearts. “We brought her back.”

“You mean—”

“Not like me,” I said, heading him off. “The ship was able to save her . . . but she *saw it*, Lorian. The next life.”

The lift doors opened, but neither one of us stepped out. “The next life . . .” Lorian said, and I knew that he believed in something rather different than what I knew was so. He believed he would be reincarnated, that his soul would transmigrate, become someone else. Something else. And yet he knew that if he took away too much of his flesh, he would cease to be *Lorian* at all—knew it with such conviction that he would not even cast his infirmity aside.

“Valka was waiting for her,” I said, staring at the floor. “She sent her back to me. My little girl.”

Lorian thrust his cane into the door to stop it shutting. “Is that when she lost her arm?”

“No,” I said, and looked at him. He was staring clean out of the lift, cane still holding the door open, as if to let me pass. But I did not exit. Not just yet. “That was Kharn Sagara.”

“I see.” Lorian nodded, stepped out of the lift himself. Looking back, he said, “I would have killed him, too.”

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CHAPTER 69

DEEP BREATH

THE STARS DANCED ABOUT my feet, reflections of the stars above. They grew still as I did, the ripples of my movement quelled. I was barefoot, and stood in the center of Sagara's pool, in the garden where I first had met my end. The trumpet lilies on the grave of Valka's clone swayed in the false wind of *Demiurge*, as above the doomed planet seemed to rise, cresting the pilastered walls of the garden, peering down like the weathered face of some stone giant.

Gododdin.

Who now recalls her mottled visage? Her amber fields? Her craggy uplands? Who alive can say that they have tasted her airs, or felt her seas close warm about their feet? Who can count her rivers like threads of silver? Her clouds like nets of pearl?

She is gone now. Gone to dust—to atoms, her atoms scattered on the solar wind.

She hung above me then: blue and beautiful, green and gold.

"You can't even see the fleet," Selene said, standing close beside me, her skirt held in one jeweled hand, revealing her slender calves.

"We're too far out," I said.

Gododdin was the size of a medallion, little larger than a gold hurasam. I might have hidden her in my fist. From so great a distance—so great a height—we could not see the planet's suffering, could not smell the smoke of her riots, hear the clamoring of her desperate and damned. Even the wreck Alexander had made of the white city could not be seen—so small it was in truth, and so remote. But for the lights of cities in the barely visible sliver of night, and the shine off one of the planet's twin mirrors—a

gleaming star—there was nothing, no sign that man had ever come to that doomed place.

“It’s easy to forget we’re on a ship,” she said, disturbing the mirrored stars with her passage. “In here, I mean.”

The roof above was pure aluminum glass, a single sheet wide and thick—perhaps the greatest in existence—without grille or sash.

“I know what you mean,” I said, not looking at her, eyes wandering the Gothic recesses of the black walls that formed the borders of the garden. There were statues there, caryatids and telamons to support the entablature that shadowed the borders of that vast, open space.

Selene tipped her head back, her carmine locks hanging half to the water’s surface. “It reminds me of the Royal Wood, you know? The trees are different, but . . .”

“I know what you mean,” I said once more, aware of the sorrow and the tiredness in both our voices.

“I suppose I won’t ever see it again,” she said, words soft and very far away.

“No,” said I. “No . . .”

“It doesn’t seem right,” she said at last, and I knew she was looking at me, though my eyes were on Gododdin. “We’re so small. Us. And the Cielcin. Life, I mean . . . To be capable of so much . . . destruction.”

I found myself nodding in sympathy, recalling the first time I had seen a planet from high orbit. That had been Delos, on the day I escaped my home. Almost a divinity that world had seemed to me then, a thing vast beyond the power of men to mar.

I know better now.

“The smallest things are often greatest, princess,” I said, and took a step, myself scattering the then-reflected stars. “Think of the power hid in every atom.”

“Or in every word?” asked she. “Will you not call me by my name, husband?”

I offered her a pained smile. “Selene,” I said, three little notes. *Not Valka*. “I’m sorry, I—”

"I understand," she said. "It is . . . strange for me, too, you know?"

"It is," I agreed. "I . . . didn't think to be here."

She laughed, and the sound of her laughter was bright music. "Neither did I. I thought—I don't know what I thought. I thought we'd be married a long time ago. That was Father's plan. I thought you'd not accept me, or that I'd have to . . . share you . . . with your Valka . . . but this?"

I looked at her, uncertain what to say.

"We have each lived many lives," I said at last. "Many lifetimes. Literally, in my case."

Another laugh, more brittle than the first.

"Do you really mean to do it?"

I didn't have to ask her what she meant.

Gododdin's sun was not visible from our current vantage point, save for its reflection in the one orbital mirror. "I have to," I said.

"But the people," Selene said, "on the planet."

"I know," I said, my back to her. "We've done everything we can."

"It isn't right."

"There is no right!" I said, and clenched my hands into fists. "Not now. Not in this world . . . there is only *good enough*."

"You don't believe that."

"I *have* to believe it," I said, and looked back at her—a slim figure in white, her hair like fire. Almost an angel she seemed to me, half kin to Ragama itself. "All my roads seem evil to me, Selene." Kings and emperors must be judged with different tools than lesser men, I think, and heroes. "Should I do nothing? Is that not *worse*?"

I had the power to end the war then. Had I not the responsibility to do so, whatever the cost? How easily the untested claim righteousness, when they have never had to choose! There was no right course for me then, unless it was to obey the maker of all things—and he had commanded me to slay the Cielcin, come what may. I had tried to avoid it, tried to run, to forge my own path. My efforts met with failure, turned all to ash.

Man is subject to nature, yes, and to the powers that govern it—but he is *master*, too. If ever this were a thing in doubt, I have ended all doubt. What

I did that day—that last day—confirmed this fact. Small that I am, I marred the very face of creation, carved my mark into the very substance of night.

I took another step, moved away from Selene—from my wife—and trod the very stars beneath my feet.

We did not know the day of their coming, or the hour, and so each second was pregnant with threat. The enemy was close. So close. So close that every man on Gododdin or in the space about her held his breath in terror of each moment, or sweating held one another in the dark, or offered sacrifice to their false gods: to Mother Earth, to Ahura Mazda, to Cid Arthur or Fortitude or the Preserver of all things.

Oft Selene and I would walk in the garden upon *Demiurge*, and talk of little things. Other times Edouard would join me, or Cassandra, or Orphan. It was Selene on that day—that I recall so sharply, though I cannot recall what conversation it was we had, if it was indeed the one I have here recorded.

But I remember her face. The fire in her eyes. In the pool beneath our feet.

One moment there were stars. The next we were plunged in darkness. The high window above our heads went black to save our eyes.

Darkness.

Night.

Song.

The music of bells rang out then, a dull and distant thunder, their changes a signal of the changing of our world.

Sound travels so much more slowly than light, and by the time I turned my head, and saw Selene standing barefoot in the pool beside me, her gown loose, puddling on the surface of the lake, a million men were dead already. It was by the light of their deaths I saw her face. Then the ship lurched beneath our feet. The bells were ringing, and the stars beyond the skylight warped and twisted. Gododdin vanished and was gone. It reappeared a moment later, less than half its previous size.

I was already running, leaving Selene to drip after me, shouting words I did not hear.

I was on the beaches of Emesh again, and it was Valka who pursued me as the sky all filled with flame. The waves beneath my feet—artifacts of my every action—reflected the fire of a thousand shattered ships.

“Master!” Orphan’s voice sounded in my ear.

“Master! Master!”

“They are here!”

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CHAPTER 70

SUDDEN FLAME

WE NEVER SAW THEM coming. Our advance stations, outriders posted beyond system's edge, never reported in. What became of them I never learned—no one ever did. But I think they must have been destroyed, each overwhelmed by the Cielcin tide, or else taken in the jaws of the Watchers themselves. For surely it was the Watchers who found them out, and—spying them from afar—bent their will upon each.

It should have been impossible. The odds of finding one little ship in the interstellar medium by random chance were so long . . . the Cielcin might have scoured the parsecs about Gododdin system for ten thousand years and never found one. But for us to have no advance warning of their coming, for us to see no sign of their warp wake . . . they must have found them all.

Wars are won in the planning, Lorian so often said. Victories aren't won, they're prepared for.

We could never have prepared for this, for what happened in the first desperate moments of the battle at Gododdin. The last battle. The end. By the time I reached the doors of the garden, dragging Selene by the hand—a mere thirty seconds into the fighting—it was already too late.

Dorayaica had learned a lesson on Danu. The *Darklight* had taken them unawares, taken them before the xenobites could offer a reply. Lacking *Darklight* weapons of their own, the Cielcin had improvised, making use of the one faster-than-light technology they possessed: their own vessels.

You must understand: An object traveling at superluminal speeds does not move at all. Rather, each vessel rides a wave in the fabric of spacetime itself, an undulating distortion that allows the vessel upon its crest to slip faster and faster through the void . . . and the Cielcin vessels were vast as

moons, and drove full through our positions without emerging from warp at all.

It was as though a tidal wave had overtaken us at anchor, and smashed the proud ships of men against the strand. There is no difference between a bend in spacetime and gravity, and gravity tore our ships apart.

They had known just where to hit us, just where our ships were massed. In synchronous orbit about the planet, in high orbit over the poles, at the Lagrange points between Gododdin and her sun. There was nothing we could do—nothing we could have done—not until it was too late.

The gravity wave tore through the armada as easily as *Darklight*, rending matter where it passed. It was as though half a hundred black holes punched through our fleet at once, dragging our vessels in their wake, twisting metal and adamant, tearing ships apart. Sun after brief sun blossomed over Gododdin as fuel tanks were breached, and vessels vast as cities died in instants.

All our years and decades of preparation turned to dust in moments.

Among the dead of that first moment was Strategos Koparkar, slain with the *Huntsman*, the pride of the Centaurine fleet, before it had ever fired a shot. Seventy years and more I had watched its construction from the English Garden behind Maddalo House, watched whole components assembled and lifted into orbit on cables long as continents.

All for nothing, for no reason at all.

How many men had served aboard her? Lay sleeping in their icy beds? Sixty thousand? Seventy? More?

And that was only *one* ship.

The initial assault claimed hundreds, *thousands* of vessels.

Millions of lives.

I was still barefoot when I reached the bridge, having left my boots in the garden. The deck was cold beneath my feet, metal smooth as glass. The great bells still were ringing, the ship reverberating.

“What happened?” I asked, one hand on the back of Orphan’s high seat.

Edouard stood by the holography well below the dais, his slender frame

illuminated by the fires of war. He alone of all those present seemed himself, not a hair out of place.

“The Cielcin used their ships as weapons,” he said.

I had to take a moment, stopped cold at the top of the steps that ran down from the captain’s seat to the floor of the bridge. Edouard explained the situation, while behind me Orphan shifted in its seat, rapt in silent communication with the ship itself.

Step by step, I descended to the level of the deck, passing Edouard to stand before the windows. With every flash—every death—my shadow painted the wall behind.

Twelve moons hung about Gododdin, each one the gutted corpse of a world, their surfaces riven with engines and hollow places whence lurked the lesser ships of their fleet. In another moment, I knew—had seen it dozens of times—those ships would sally forth, and sow fire and destruction upon the shattered core of our fleet in orbit about the doomed planet.

Only twelve, I thought, subitizing. “Where are the rest?”

There were some seventeen hundred worldships in the Cielcin fleet.

“Where are the rest, Orphan?” I asked.

The creature raised all three of its hands. A plea for silence, for time we did not have. A flash shone in the deep night outside, the death of another vessel. Another. A third.

“We jumped?” I asked, sparing a glance for Selene, her breast still heaving from the run that had carried us from the garden.

“About six light-seconds from our prior orbit,” Edouard said, circling the holography well—which then depicted local space in wire-frame. It showed Gododdin, beleaguered. As I watched, another worldship winked into view, appearing at the terminus of a vector tangent to orbit with the planet itself. “Orphan realized what was happening, carried us clear.”

I looked up at the giant, its heads bowed, eyes all closed. It looked as if it were listening. In truth, its mind mingled with the computer core, straining to apprehend all that passed outside.

“Where is Lorian?” I asked. “Olorin? Bassander?”

Edouard shook his head. “We can’t get a signal, the radiation flash—”

I swallowed. A ship traveling at warp gathered charged particles from the interstellar medium as it went, until the envelope of folded space that swathed the vessel was full of poison. It was for that reason that real-space reversion of necessity occurred far out from the target planet. If it did not, it would be as if a nuclear weapon were detonated just outside the atmosphere. Historically, the Cielcin had always been careful to emerge at the edge of the target system. They’d wanted a siege, to pillage and plunder, to rape and eat.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Edouard asked, thinking along the same lines.

I shook my head, rounded on the high windows. Until Orphan spoke, there was nothing I could do, nothing but wait. It was Akterumu again. I might as well have chained myself to a pillar for all the good I was.

“What of my father?” The voice that spoke was soft, fragile as spun glass. It was Selene, of course. She had descended the steps of the dais, had come to stand alongside me.

I had forgotten the Emperor. *Aurora* was stationed—along with a critical mass of the Martian armada—in orbit about Cynon, some forty light-minutes away.

“He might not even know we’re attacked yet,” Edouard said.

Surely someone had gotten off a telegraph, but so little time had passed . . . we might be the first. “Get a message to Ketevan,” I said. “*Gadelica*’s telegraph connects directly to the Imperial relays. Go!”

Edouard turned his back, fingers going to his comm as he shouted orders down to Ketevan aboard *Gadelica*—safely in one of *Demiurge*’s mighty holds. Like a caged beast, I reeled, stalked toward the windows. Even at our great distance, I could see the Cielcin ships. One appeared above the planet then, the prismatic flash of reversion heralding its coming like the trumpet blast. I strained my vision then, searching, *searching* across the night.

I felt nothing, no questing eyes, no supernal malice.

The Watchers were nowhere to be found.

If they had not come . . . if Dorayaica had not come . . .

“We have to return fire,” I said, directing my words over one shoulder to the giant in its seat. “Orphan. Conjure the *Darklight*.”

The many-hander stirred at last, dark eyes opening. The black-haired head spoke then, saying, “They have attacked the fleet at each massing.”

Edouard looked up from his comm. “The Lagrange points?”

“Yes,” Orphan said, still the basso speaking. “They must have known it was where we’d place our ships.” At the giant’s thought-command, the holograph pulled back until Gododdin was a mote about its supergiant star. The number of ships in Gododdin system had grown so great—the space in her orbits so crowded—that whole battle groups had been stationed at the Lagrange points about her orbit, where the gravitational pull of the planet and its star were balanced, so that the ships in each location might hold their positions with ease.

It was standard practice. The laws of physics mandated it be standard practice.

Had the Cielcin simply guessed? Or had they known?

“You’re certain?” I asked. The nearest of those points lay several million miles from Gododdin itself, light-minutes. “Is L1 reporting? Can we see it yet?”

“Light won’t reach us for another two minutes,” said Edouard, checking his terminal. “Assuming they were hit at the same time as the planet.”

Orphan interjected. “We felt their warp signatures on gravimetric detection.”

I felt my heart sink.

“They are here,” it said, voice deep as the night outside.

And again, high as angels, “They are here.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Seventeen now,” it said, “about Gododdin.”

The white-haired head opened its watery eyes, peered blearily at me. “Nigh as many at each massing, or so we think.”

“A little more than a hundred,” said Edouard.

Selene’s face was white as her gown.

“Not even a tenth of their full force,” I said, snarling. “This is just the

vanguard.”

“Or this is all,” said Edouard.

“You don’t know that!” I said. Could I use *Astrophage* against such a force?

No. No, the weapon could only be fired once. Its use was its destruction, and would apprise Dorayaica and its dark masters of the all of which we were capable.

“We have to rally the fleet,” I said. “Prepare the *Darklight* weapons, target the nearest worldship.”

“But the planet!” Edouard protested.

“The planet is lost!” I said. We had no time to hear of it. Seventeen worldships had emerged in near orbit, bathed the planet in radiation, caused the explosive death of much of the Imperial fleet. If the shock of that emergence had not doomed the place already, the meteoric rain of the ruined fleet would.

Edouard’s eyes widened behind his glasses, but he did not fade before me. “There’s nothing we can do now,” I said, towering over the young fellow. “Do you understand?”

The adorator relented, withdrew a step. “God help us.”

“Fire *Darklight*.”

Orphan’s voice was like that of a god, though whether Zeus or Hades I could not say. “Firing.”

No ray of light was there, nor beam of darkness visible—as with the firing of *Artemision*. Within the weapon’s area of effect, space stretched, sped faster as the quantum foam spread thin. Unseen, unfelt, faster-than-light, the blade of the *Darklight* hove across the face of the nearest Cielcin ship. Her fuel reserves—buried deep below the surface to protect against bombardment—were nevertheless vast as seas. It was a small thing to find them, to disrupt the delicate structures that imprisoned them.

The eruption filled the void with fire, with light white as the death of suns.

“Prepare to fire again,” I said, knowing the weapon would need time to recharge.

“Master!” came the sound of the giant’s castrato. “We are receiving a transmission!”

“It is the *Mnemon*!” said its counterpart.

A palpable wave of relief washed over me then. *Olorin*. Kaim-Olorin was alive. I gestured for the projectors to begin their work, heedless of my appearance.

“Olorin!” I said before the silverfish had completed their render, then waited for the necessary time to elapse for my signal to make the journey and return. It was several seconds, during which the specter of the man crackled to life like a fire before me, his words garbled, his form distorted, riven with static.

“—to find you well!” came the familiar voice. “When we lost sight of Demiurge on our sensors, we were fearing the worst!”

“Where are you?” I asked, waited.

A full fourteen seconds elapsed. We were some six or seven seconds apart, then. That was centuries in our present circumstance.

“Low orbit,” said he. “These davoï . . . the Cielcin . . . Hadrian, they used their ships.”

“I know,” I said.

“Your Strategos Koparkar is dead,” he said. “And Rempel. And Fadroh.”

“Captain Afsharirad?” I asked. I remembered the *aryabite* officer well. He was, I think, one of the prince’s oldest friends. “I am sorry.”

Orphan injected itself into one of our long silences, saying, “Master, we are prepared to fire.”

“Hold,” I said, raising a hand. To Olorin I spoke more urgently. “You must get your ships to higher orbit. Get above the Cielcin if you can.”

“It is war!” said Olorin, his fervency made strangely comic by the long delay between responses.

“You saw what I did to that worldship,” I said. Already the wreckage of the vessel I’d destroyed was breaking up about Gododdin, forming the first moonlets of a brief ring. The shrapnel of that once-great vessel would

become a barrage of meteors, a spiraling cloud of panic, like so much buckshot forever firing, traveling round the world at ever increasing speeds.

“You have to get our people out of there!” I said, speaking before Olorin’s reply could arrive.

Edouard intruded even as the prince replied, words stepping over one another in the desperation of the moment. “The Cielcin fleet is deploying from their worldships.”

“Target the worldship in highest orbit,” I said. Targeting the vessel in highest orbit would give Olorin time to escape, would transform the vessel into a hail of missiles falling, falling with ever-increasing speed to ground.

The Prince of Jadd’s image faltered, voice came through in juddering starts. “*I will—you say . . .*”

“Good,” I said, and turning to Orphan, gave the order.

Light!

Light white as heaven itself filled the forward windows, fountained over the limn of distant Gododdin like a newborn star while deep in the guts of the behemoth beneath my feet, bells black as eternity tolled with renewed urgency.

“We are spotted,” Orphan said with one voice.

With the other, it added, “They are firing on us.”

I whirled to regard the map at my back, saw the cloud of missiles—like a rain of arrows on the fields of far-gone France—falling toward us cross the black.

“Deploy *Albedo*!” I said belatedly, knowing it would take minutes to deploy the Archontic weapon. “Open fire on the swarm!”

Edouard lay a hand on my shoulder. His other hand was at his ear. “It’s Ketevan,” he said. “She got through to the Emperor. He’s alive. The Cielcin have not deployed at Cynon.”

A small sound escaped Selene, half-forgotten by the well.

“He intends to hold his position,” the adorator said.

“Is there any sign of the greater Cielcin fleet?” I asked.

Edouard relayed my question to Ketevan via the comm.

“More are coming . . .” Selene’s voice seemed pressed flat as dead

flowers. She held herself tightly, nodded at the holograph.

Moment by moment, more lights appeared, winking into existence about the planet, about the various Lagrange points.

“Do you know where Lorian is?” I asked Kaim-Olorin’s spectral form. “Bassander Lin?”

“*Roundtable Fleet vanished when you did,*” came the prince’s reply.

Of course. Our own quick response and relocation had been made possible by the ship’s computer mind—and by Orphan. Among his officers, Lorian counted Exalted chimeras, captains of the Interfaced, Extrasolarians of all description—men and postmen whose minds were, if not the equal of Orphan and *Demiurge* together, at least of an order similar. They would have seen what Orphan had seen, acted as Orphan had acted.

“They jumped,” I said, looking round. “Are they not on scan?”

Edouard shook his head.

Then they had jumped further than time had elapsed since the battle began. Wherever they were, we could not see them—not yet. *Or*, whispered a slithering voice in my left ear, *they might have deserted.*

No. I dismissed the whisper at a thought. *Not Lorian.*

But I knew what he had done—what he must have done. He had jumped *outside*. Where we had but reacted, he had acted, moved his fleet far *enough* that he’d had time to wheel about and catch the light of the first assault as it reached his sensors all afresh. He would have traveled far enough to allow himself the opportunity to watch that first attack play out. To rob the enemy of the element of surprise, to dispel the fog of war.

But how far had he gone?

Too far to help us then.

Standing at the great window, the prince’s phantom flickering at my side, I felt as one must have felt at the ramparts of some ancient city, watching the catapults rain fire.

The guns of *Demiurge* answered them, lasers flying faster than their missiles ever could, blazing to intercept.

“Can we move?” I asked.

“Translation is not possible,” came Orphan’s reply. “The warp drive

must recover.”

We had just used it, after all.

I weighed our choices. We were not *in* orbit around Gododdin. Our jump—short though it was—had carried us well beyond the reach of the world’s meager gravity, and what momentum we’d had before the jump had vanished during it. We were falling slowly—very slowly—into orbit around Gododdin’s distant giant sun, itself little larger than a coin at its immense distance.

“How long before the swarm reaches us?” I asked.

“It is four minutes, thirty-two seconds to first contact, Master,” said Orphan.

“Can *Albedo* deploy in time?”

A pause. “No.”

We were alone in our position, and though the hull of *Demiurge* bristled like a hedgehog with turrets and with guns, the weapons of the Cielcin were numberless as the stars. We could never destroy them, not alone, not even if we sent photonic mines against them—and we did. The little probes—pushed by lasers aboard *Demiurge*—sped forward carrying their tiny payloads. Each little device carried a grain of antilithium in magnetic suspension, each payload a mote of vile dust. They turned to clouds of light and fire, and tore the enemy’s weapons to pieces. But the missiles hurled at us by the disgorging horde were miles apart at the nearest, and still on they came.

“Take us toward the planet,” I said, “full burn.”

“That will carry us right into the swarm!” Edouard said.

I ignored him. “Take us down,” I said, pointing. “Under them. Put us on an intercept course with the fleet in orbit.” I looked to Olorin’s ghost. “We are coming to your rescue.”

The holograph shimmered, smiled beneath its articulated enameled mask. “See you then in high orbit.”

I turned my head to the giant. “Divert all power to forward shields. Fire the *Darklight* at your first opportunity. We’ll make them rue this day.”

Demiurge jumped beneath us, engines flaring to life.

How can I make you understand what it was like? That war where worlds were hurled like thunderbolts? Where moons were shattered and turned to dust? You may think I felt terror—and I might have, had I been with the men belowdecks, wondering at every sound, every roar of thunder as the ship shook beneath our feet, as alarms blared and bells rang. But I could see it. All of it. The planet. The worldships.

It was only that it seemed unreal.

I felt no fear as we dove beneath the Cielcin onslaught, toward the doomed planet and the beleaguered ships of man. No terror as still another of their worlds burst like ripe fruit beneath the pressure of our guns.

Another Cielcin ship emerged from warp, collided with one of its brothers. The gravity wave that had carried the newcomer down into Gododdin system had gathered countless of our ships in its wake, broke them just as the *Darklight* had broken its brethren, by twisting the very space through which they sailed. Sun after sun flowered about the planet, each born and dead in instants.

Against that background of dying moons, our own fleet was lost. To spy the ships of man's armada was to pick out gnats against a backdrop of warring elephants. *Demiurge* quaked beneath my feet, and I knew that one of the Cielcin weapons had detonated somewhere against our shields.

"They will try to board us," Edouard said.

"We can't let them," I said. "We do not have the men to repel an invasion."

Again, the ship shook.

Our path would bring us close to Gododdin, but our speed and steep descent from on high would carry us round the planet in a sharp ellipse, back the way we had come.

Cassandra had found the bridge in the chaos, stood beside Orphan. She was not dressed for battle, but her hand was on her sword, and her eyes were hard as flints. "If they board us," she said, "they won't live to regret it."

The woman she'd become was not the girl with whom I'd passed countless hours on the floor of the solarium in the manse by the sea. The

child who had played pirate, and drawn little birds with wax pastels, who had looked blearily up at me one night by the light of Jadd's three moons and burbled my name for the first time was gone, transformed—as are we all—into something else.

“Abba?”

Edouard stood stock-still by the projection well, head cocked, listening. Selene was hugging herself, her eyes wide and far away. Even Orphan was watching me—with its dark-eyed face, at least—the other stared up at the dim vaults above our heads.

“What is it?” Hers was yet the same voice, the voice of the woman who had come down from the summit of the *Kauf Adar*—sweating and burned—and collapsed in my arms. *Abba! It's done!* she had said then. *I did it.*

The same voice. The voice of the girl who had suffered at the hands of her Jaddian classmates time and time again.

When will I be one of them? she'd asked.

Never, I told her, truly.

Then what am I?

The vessel shook beneath us, wracked by some other explosion. Her face was hard as stone, her jaw set.

“I cannot sense them,” I said, looking at her.

“The Monumentals?” asked Edouard.

“They're not here.” Cassandra looked stricken.

“Along with most of their fleet,” I said, and looking round at Edouard, asked, “There was nothing more from the Emperor?”

The HAPSIS man shook his head.

I clenched my teeth. The whole of their armada had been at Forum. Had Dorayaica guessed my plan? Did it know all that Kharn's vessel was capable of? It had helped to build Vorgossos, to rebuild it in the image of one of their worldships. It would have had every opportunity.

But no. Here Soonchanged had hinted at Sagara's secret wars, his personal, private campaign against the Watchers in the night. Sagara was many things, but he was no fool. He must have known what gods his ally

worshipped. He must have concealed his most secret weapon, guarded the truth of *Demiurge* with the jealousy of an old dragon.

“Then we must draw them out,” I said, looking to Orphan. The centimanus still was watching me, its gold-crowned face half-smiling. “Is *Albedo* prepared?”

The giant looked sidelong at its other face. The white-haired head stirred from its contemplation of the ceiling, pale eyes seeking almost blindly in the gloom of the bridge. “It is prepared.”

“Good,” I said, “prepare to fire on my mark.” I turned, and barefoot trod the lone and level ground back to the high windows. Spying two soldiers in HAPSIS livery, I said, “Fetch my harness from *Ascalon*.”

• • •

Albedo left her berth upon *Demiurge*, a falling star. The daimon that guided her awoke and—seeing the horde of the Cielcin unrolled before it—*sang*. It was for this that she was made, for this her makers had written her into being so very long ago.

For war.

Her hull was highmatter, its particles bound together by the same force that binds protons to neutrons. There was no force in all that solar system—save some of fellow archons—who could have broken her. She might have plunged full through Gododdin itself and come out the other side. Her mind was crystal, silicon and gold, her thoughts pure light. To her each second was a century, an aeon of opportunity—a lifetime and more. Before the first second of her wakefulness had passed, she had mapped every ship of the fleet before her. The nineteen moons that encircled the planet. The wreckage of the three her sisters had destroyed. She counted twenty-one thousand, three hundred thirty-seven lesser ships. The greatest of these were of stone, asteroids hollowed and converted, miles long. But most of them were small—things of crude steel, each carrying no more than a dozen of the Pale.

And then there were the missiles. She counted them in millions. Three million. Four million. Five. And so many of them aimed at her ship. At her sisters.

She traced a path through them all, marking every target, every vessel, every fusion reactor and fuel tank, every warhead and payload.

She'd made her plan.

That first second of her wakefulness ended.

On she flared.

Her makers—her mothers, their fathers—had given her a heart of fire, a nuclear furnace like a little sun. Her engines were beyond the minds of men, reliant on principles the human brain could never fathom. In an instant, she was moving at half the speed of light, smashing through target after target like a hammer.

At the end of her second second of awareness, three thousand eight hundred ninety-one of the twenty-one thousand, three hundred thirty-seven ships were destroyed. She could not even be certain how many of the missiles she had unmade.

At the end of the third, that number exceeded five thousand—among them two of the false moons. She had plunged into their surfaces—expecting to meet resistance, magnetic fields, molten cores. She found nothing but cold, dead stone. That, and a sea of antihydrogen, a lake of liquid gas kept at temperatures a fraction of a degree above absolute zero. Fearing to plunge into that sea, she smashed through one of the vessel's huge fuel injectors. By the time the leak caused the start of the annihilation cascade, she had already left the planet, passed through its far side and was through the bodies of a hundred other ships.

A fourth second passed, in which she counted the devastation she had caused, factored in the changes that devastation had wrought.

Five seconds. Six.

What must the Cielcin have thought, watching from aboard their ships? Had they time to think at all? Still standing before the great windows, I watched it all transpire in a moment. The light of the two slain worldships

shone so bright the glass had to darken to spare my eyes. The atmosphere aboard the bridge was funereal, grim as any wake.

“Sweet God of Fire . . .” said Kaim-Olorin, phantom shining at my side.

We were still quite far from Gododdin itself. *Albedo* had raced ahead of us, went spiraling through the ships ahead.

“That is the one?” he asked, *“The weapon you used at Vorgossos?”*

“One of them,” I said, not looking at him. “Not the one that killed Ohannes Douro.”

At our present speed, we would reach our perigee within the hour, and so come as close as we would to Olorin, to the survivors of that first assault, and to Gododdin itself. Already the wreck of the Cielcin fleet was fanning out about the planet, tumbling in a cascade of twisted metal and shattered stone. Had Gododdin survived, it might have found itself with a glittering belt, a circlet of broken moons.

But Gododdin’s life was not then measured in centuries, nor in days, nor hours—as I then deemed.

But in moments.

Moments.

Somewhere, a bell rang. Not the deep, sonorous sound of the alarm—but one high and clear as crystal. A clarion.

The comm.

“Who is it?” I asked.

Orphan looked at itself, conferring. “It is the fleet,” it said, wringing its three huge hands.

“The fleet. The fleet!”

“Our fleet?” I asked. “What ship?”

“Put it through!” said Cassandra, rounding on the giant.

The silverfish rippled in the air about us, widening their area of effect.

A shade stumped silently into view alongside Olorin, a study in sable. The bearded face beneath the white officer’s beret was known to me, and I delighted to see it.

“Lin!”

“Hadrian!” said the old Phoenix. *“What in Earth’s holy name was*

that . . . thing?"

I did not know if his pause were due to signal lag or simple awe. His image—like the image of the Jaddian prince beside him—faltered and shuddered. The joy I'd felt at his appearance tempered at once. "A weapon of the old world," I said. "A machine forged by machines for just such a day as this."

"It's incredible," said Lin, leaning on his cane. *"Can you destroy the rest of them?"*

"I can," I said, "but you must get your ships clear of Gododdin local space."

"The fleet is lost," Lin said. *"Koparkar is dead. And Rempel. Most of the Normans."*

"The Emperor is alive," I said.

"I know," said he. *"And the bulk of the Admiralty is safe in the bunkers under Fort Din. With your weapons and their tactical oversight, we'll win the day."*

He did not know about *Astrophage*. I looked at Olorin.

"I need you to get your ships clear of the planet," I said. "We have to win free! Fall back to L2!"

"The fleet at L2 is besieged!" Lin said.

"Then you must relieve them!"

Lin hesitated, just a moment, and in that moment I recalled the man he had been: my adversary and nemesis. But the man he was saluted, fist to breast. *"My Son of Earth."*

"Don't call me that," I said. It was treason. "Lorian took the Extrasolarians out beyond the light-front to gather intelligence. It falls to us to resolve matters here."

"You should address the men," said Bassander Lin.

"I—" Dread fell upon me then, like a solitary drop of rain on a night without a star. I froze, felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. Turning, I saw four men entering the bridge with a crate like a coffin between them. It was my harness, newly cleaned and readied.

But it was not the men who so filled my heart with dread in that

moment, nor the presence of the armor that had journeyed so far with me, and for so long.

It was something else.

A feeling.

The sensation of eyes on the back of my head.

“They’re here,” I said.

“*Who?*” Lin’s word was thick with static.

Cassandra’s eyes were on me, but it was not her gaze that turned to ice on my skin. The pressure was gone. The eyes had moved on. They had seen the ship—how could they have missed it? Perhaps Kharn’s defenses had done their work.

“The Watchers.”

“They’ve seen us?” Edouard asked.

I could only shake my head. “I don’t think so. Not yet.”

I did not dare seek them out, did not dare exercise my power. I hardly dared to move, fearing that my slightest action would reveal me. But if the fear I felt for ourselves was terrible, the fear I felt for the others was more terrible still. The Emperor’s fleet—hitherto unnoticed about distant Cynon—was surely revealed in that moment.

They had been at warp. Miudanar and Ushara, safe aboard Dharan-Tun, and thus cut off from the causal domain of ordinary space and time. I could not have sensed their presence, and they could not have sensed mine.

“*How can you know this?*” asked Kaim-Olorin. “*There is nothing on our sensors.*”

“They’re here,” I said.

“*But where—*”

Kaim-Olorin never finished that sentence, or if he did, the signal swallowed his words.

For in that very moment a light—brighter and more terrible than the light that had stolen poor Argo’s eyes—streamed through the high window. The ship’s daimons polarized the glass in time to save us all from blindness, but still the horror and the radiance of it filled the bridge and carved our

shadows against the blasphemous sculpture that rose titanic behind the titan's throne.

What happened then happened in utter silence—but for the tolling of *Demiurge's* distant bells.

There should be thunder. The thought was like a bell itself: ringing, ringing in my mind. I looked on in terror, mouth agape, eyes wide. It wasn't real. Couldn't be real.

Selene let out a strangled cry, turned to me. I drew her close, my arms about her, one hand on the back of her head—as if by averting her eyes I might erase the horror she had already seen.

The planet—Gododdin itself—*shattered*.

I saw it die.

Something had struck it, something massive. One of the Cielcin moons?

One moment it was there: surrounded, assailed, but alive.

The next it convulsed, whole continents chipped from its face like bits of old paint, hurled ten thousand miles into the air as the mantle beneath convulsed, and I saw the world for what it was: a glede, a drop of molten glass still hot from the forging, its surface a dry crust over flame. The whole of that droplet rippled, throwing out rivers, ribbons of magma. The thing that had struck it had struck it a glancing blow, so that a stream of fire erupted, spiraling with the angular momentum of the strike. That was when I saw it: the worldship. Mighty as Dharan-Tun it was, perhaps a third so great as Gododdin itself. It had emerged from warp only when it struck the planet.

A suicide strike.

In the instant that followed, a chorus of signals fountained over the comm, flooding my ears with reports and distress signals.

Terror. And horror. And pain.

“Alert! Alert!”

“—is *ISV Rhadamanthus* broadcasting on all channels—”

“*Laqamatre tuta godra a primaria motoreya subfossima!*” said a voice in Jaddian.

“—general evacuation! Requesting immediate assistance!”

“Can’t escape!”

“*Ni perdas alticon!*” That was one of the Normans.

“The *Parnassus* is . . . gone!”

“Break orbit! All ships! Break orbit!”

Bassander’s ghost had turned its back. The man was shouting orders, gesticulating madly to his bridge crew.

“Our approach is unstable!” said Orphan as the ship lurched beneath us and an alarm bell rang high and urgently in the vaults above the bridge. “We must burn free!”

“Do it!” I said.

Demiurge bucked beneath my feet, and we were burning free, pushing away from the ruined planet to the deep cold and desert of space. Orphan’s path was meant to bring us into a stable orbit about the planet’s sun. As we moved, Gododdin left my sight, rolled away to the right as the ship rotated on its axis, putting the world behind us and plunging us into darkness as we faced out toward the farther suns.

Quiet again.

Silence.

Gododdin was gone.

And not by my hand.

You have heard it said that it was Hadrian Marlowe who destroyed Gododdin along with its star, but it is not so. You know what you’ve been *made* to know.

By my enemies.

By the Lords and Princes of *Mother* Earth.

By he who sits the throne.

Lin’s ghost was barking orders to men I could not see. Edouard and Orphan were conferring, while all about us the soldiers on the bridge shook, or stood in shocked silence, or prayed.

“Holy Mother Earth, keep us and protect us in Darkness and in the land of strangers . . .”

“—with the sword of your courage, O Fortitude.”

“—who art All-Pervading, bring in appearance like the moon—”

“—protect us and preserve us as you preserve all things . . .”

Against my breast, Selene murmured, “Beautiful art thou, O Earth, and desirable, for thou hast given thyself to all that liveth . . .”

I prised her from myself. “Enough of that,” I said, and rounding on the others, I shouted, “Your false gods cannot avail you! They are dead, or never were! There is only one god—and he has sent us! He has sent *me*.” I saw the faces of the men gathered there. Soldiers from Sabratha, survivors of the battle at Phanamhara, a pair of Danuans. Ramanthanu and Otomno had appeared somewhere in the chaos, as had Annaz and certain of his countrymen: black feathered, green feathered, and gray. “*We* are his vengeance! His instrument! His blade!” I thrust a finger at the deck beneath my feet—still bare. Selene held my other hand. How she trembled then—my wife, the Empress then-to-be. “Let us make an end to this!”

As I spoke, the cold, quiet dread fell on me once more like rain. The Watchers had heard me, but they could not find me. Not there. The ship remained concealed, if only for the moment. They would find it soon enough, as Ushara had found it above Danu—and when they did, hell would be unleashed.

Unless we stopped them. Unless *I* stopped them.

But where was Dharan-Tun? It must have arrived in the system, but it was not yet on our sensors. That meant it was far away. Light-minutes at least, and perhaps more. The Watchers were creatures from above, from the space beyond space, from the long night through which I alone of all living men have traveled. They were not bound by light’s slow speed, could be any place at once, could see all that passed the system at a glance—save the location of our ship alone.

“We will take the fight to them!” I said, holding Edouard’s gaze a moment, then Orphan’s, then the eye of one random soldier.

There is no crowd, Gibson murmured in my ear. *Only men*.

There were tears on Cassandra’s face, though her cast was stern as steel.

“They think they’ve beaten us! Broken us!” I said, lifting up my voice. “They think this a victory? They think Forum a victory? No!” I stamped my foot, and the slap of it filled the hall like a bolt of lightning. “It is their

doom, not ours! They go too far!" I let go of Selene's hand. "My god has given sentence. He has made his justice plain." My voice fell, soft and ragged—and my face fell with it. Eyes on Ramanthanu, on Otomno, I said, "The Cielcin must be destroyed."

If their hearts were troubled, they gave no sign.

With Gododdin lost, there was nothing left to save. Nothing, save *everything*—the whole of man's dominion. The enemy had itself cleared the path to their own destruction.

Gododdin's corpse hung in space behind me, a wheel of fire. "The Emperor yet lives! The Martian fleet is all at Cynon. They have the atomics. We must win free and meet them . . ." I looked round, marked Bassander's ghost. "Lorian and his Roundtable Fleet are alive . . . and we have the Archontic weapons . . ." I met each of Orphan's gazes in their turn. "Lin, with me. Olorin—" I stopped short, looked round, seeking the prince's ghost.

He was gone.

CHAPTER 71

THE DIN OF WAR

HE WAS GONE . . . AND I hadn't even noticed.

A hole had been pierced in the world, as surely as if I'd fired one of the Archontic weapons. My mind went black, went back to a single square of darkness, a window onto nothing.

A dead signal.

I hardly heard Orphan's voices as they spoke, confirming the destruction of *Mnemon*, the eradication of so many of the ships that had been in orbit round Gododdin in the instant of its annihilation.

Too close. Too close . . .

Tears stood upon my face, with no mask to hide them.

Kaim Sanchez Cyaxares Nazir-Vincente Olorin ban Osroes ban Aldia du Otranto.

Darkmoon Prince of Jadd. Swordmaster of the Second Circle.

Olorin Milta.

My friend.

My friend was gone.

In his place there was nothing.

There was only silence.

I thought of the soldiers at Akterumu, their bloody faces, their grasping hands as they spurred me on, pressed me forward, toward the ship Pallino had brought—which the Absolute had sent—to save my life.

To save it *for that day*, for this purpose.

And so I steeled myself, and let the air stretch my nostrils wide.

Grief was deep water—so Gibson had always said.

Had I not drunk my fill of it?

Would not Olorin himself have laughed at death, and gone to the arms of

his false god full-willing? Did I myself not know his soul would be redeemed? Reclaimed in the night of our creation for the dawn of the new day that was to come?

On this did I meditate—and pray—while I vanished into the darkened chapterhouse that stood to starboard of the great bridge. There, accompanied by Selene and Cassandra—my family—I girt myself for war, donning for the last time the armor the Emperor had given me.

Of black was the suit of hose I donned, all black my kit and cuirass. Nigh so old as I it was, forged by the Emperor's own smiths for his loyal knight—the man I once had been. Each piece attached itself to my padded hosiery in turn, electromagnets *clacking* as Cassandra and the princess put the armor onto me. I felt the arcane mechanisms of gearworks and levers tightening, locking each component in its place. The Jaddians had restored it to new life in the long years of my exile, illuminating its embellishments with gold enameling, so that the pattern of seraph wings upon my breast and upon my gauntlets shone dull gold in the gloom of that small chamber, and when Selene secured the lorica about my chest she kissed me, and I did not pull away.

Then she was gone, and Cassandra put my sword into my hand.

Olorin had given me my first sword.

Iffero fosim, he had said to me that sweltering day, beneath the light of a sun as swollen with age as the sun of Gododdin. *Bring light.*

I took the sword—Gibson's sword—and strapped it to my waist. Perhaps Olorin was right—and my god and his were one and the same. The god of Jadd was a god of fire, after all, and fire was to be the instrument of our deliverance.

Then Cassandra handed me the fire starter. The transmitter.

Edouard's handheld telegraph, which I had used to slay Brethren, would use to slay the very gods.

I will.

• • •

The Cielcin vanguard lay in ruins, whole worlds annihilated by our counterattack, their corpses drifting in nothingness about the gutted body of Gododdin. How many dead were there between them? Human and Cielcin both?

Still the remaining fleet had not appeared.

“Telegraph the Emperor,” I said into the brittle silence. “And Lorian, and Lin. Tell them the Cielcin are here. The Watchers are here. Tell them their light has not yet reached us.”

Edouard and Orphan both hurried to obey.

This is the day, I thought. The end.

We had broken orbit, were on a path past the second Lagrange point on our way to rendezvous with the fleet at Cynon, but the space about Gododdin was too fraught with death to safely sail. We had made to widen our orbit, to give the ekpyrotic planet space to burn. We pressed our engines hard, accelerating out of our orbit, burning our way cross interplanetary space.

It would take weeks to reach Cynon. We did not have weeks, would have to jump—I knew—to reach the outer planet.

Still, we were on course.

“Where are they?” Edouard asked, standing then by the high windows. He too had donned armor—the standard Imperial white.

“Cynon?” Cassandra ventured, hand on the hilt of her sword. “The Emperor?”

“We would know,” I said.

If the Cielcin followed standard procedure, they would emerge near the borders of the system, would fall inward in slow, inexorable circles, the icy cauls that sheathed their vessels turning to cometary tails as they approached the mighty sun, each ship an omen of doom.

“Anything from Lorian?” I asked.

Edouard shook his head. “Ketevan is standing by the telegraph.”

“He might have fled,” said Cassandra.

“Not Lorian.”

Had Dorayaica seen my mind? Understood my plan? Did it know what

Demiurge was capable of? Had it spied out the truth of the vessel in its long collaboration with the Lord of Vorgossos after all?

"Then where is he?" Cassandra asked.

It was a fair question. "I don't know."

"There is still much interference," said Orphan.

And its other self agreed. "Much," it said, "and more."

"That wouldn't affect the telegraph," said Edouard. "I'll have Ketevan contact the Emperor again. And try Roundtable Fleet."

"See it done," I said.

We were alone. The Emperor was ensconced in orbit around Cynon, surrounded by his loyal knights. Olorin was dead, our fleet scattered.

I consoled myself that at least the worst of the Chantry's sorcerers were dead. Tarquin had died with Gododdin, and Yod.

But Dharan-Tun had not appeared.

"I'll go to *Ascalon* myself," I said. It was not that I distrusted Ketevan, but I felt the palpable need to be doing *something*, and to man the telegraph myself seemed *something* then, and somehow closer to the action.

No one challenged me. Selene looked stricken.

I made to go, but before I reached the door, Edouard said, "It's Ketevan! Incoming telegraph."

I froze, awaiting the message like a man expecting a knife to land between his shoulders.

The words came from behind me, as if disembodied. "The fleet is under attack," he said, voice tight with pain.

"At Cynon?" I turned. "The Emperor?"

I looked to Orphan for confirmation. "We should have felt their wake."

When Edouard spoke, it was to confirm my deepest fear.

"It's not the Cielcin," he said.

Some cold serpent moved in my belly, wound tight about my organs.

I asked the dreadful question: "The Watchers?"

He nodded, said, "It isn't Cynon."

"The survivors from Gododdin?" I asked. "Behind us?"

Edouard nodded again. "What are your orders?"

It was Ushara. It had to be. Miudanar was yet bound to Dorayaica's physical form, and the Prophet-King of the Cielcin would not take the field like some common captain. It commanded from the rear, from *above*, arriving only to claim its victory.

"Master!" Orphan interjected. "If we reveal ourselves—"

"I know!" I said, speaking over the beast.

There were lesser Archontic weapons. If the Cielcin fleet had not arrived—if Dorayaica were not present, if Ushara had come alone—there were other means. *Artemision* remained, and there were other weapons capable of generating a singularity. Might it be possible to trap a Watcher in the heart of such a thing?

And there was *Voidmaker*.

Across the blackness, nearly a hundred million miles away, the fleet was in chaos.

The gates of hell were opened amidst the fleet, and all the fire and fury within fountained forth, just as it had above Danu, just as it had on Sabratha.

The survivors would later speak of *hands*, of great fingers—veined with starlight like cosmic filaments—reaching out to seize whole vessels in their grasp. In the moments that followed, the distress signals began washing over us. A torrent of them, a tide.

"*Olympos* is gone!"

"—never seen anything like it!"

"Fire everything!"

"Where is Lord Marlowe?"

"It's got *Samarkand*!"

And there were images, footage broadcast by dying men. A terrible rent in the void whence destruction came. And there she was in its midst, turning like a wheel, descending as from clouds, from some *higher place* no mortal eye could see. It was as though unseen clouds had parted, and her hideous bulk—miles wide—lowered itself like a spider atop its prey. Not for the first time, I thought of Three-Faced Fate passing her golden thread from one of her six hands to the next. A shining arm, longer than the longest ship of

the fleet behind us, lanced out, dragging a line of fire like the aurora in its wake. Blue it was and violet, and emerald green and gold, and where it went fire followed, and ships broke like jars of clay.

Desperate then, I shouted, “Where is *Albedo*?”

Orphan issued a command, and the daimon machine obeyed. Ten million miles away, it soared, an arrow—a thunderbolt—hurled back at our enemy: the killer of ten thousand ships. On it sang, half so fast as light itself and deadly, aimed straight at the fiery heart of those turning rings.

Ushara’s will was shapeless, formless, a pattern in energy, but her body had some substance. I had touched it at Phanamhara, when the blast of NEM weapons had turned so much of her to stone.

Albedo slashed the void between them, hurried back across the miles, a million at a stride. There was nothing in the system that could have overtaken her flight, nothing faster.

Nothing . . . save Ushara.

The beast had seen her coming, flaring in the night, and reaching out—as I did, across time—with one spectral hand, she *caught it*, held *Albedo* as a child might trap a buzzing fly.

And she *crushed it*, and cast its ruin upon the void.

Orphan’s voice pronounced its death.

“Weapon destroyed.”

“Lost. Lost.”

Beside me, Selene shuddered.

All was silent on the bridge a moment, but for the noise of the ceaseless distress calls, the reports flooding in.

“Where is Lin?” I asked.

“Gone ahead,” said Edouard. “You ordered him ahead to the Emperor, don’t you remember?”

“Did I?” I extricated myself from Selene, looked round, wide-eyed, at the displays drifting in the air about us. “Good. Good.” It was my turn to swallow my mutinous heart. “Telegraph the Emperor,” I said weakly. “Make sure he is safe.”

Edouard moved to obey.

“We can’t do *nothing*!” Cassandra said.

“What would you have me do?”

“We have to save them!” she said.

I thrust a hand at the map, at the cloud of images displaying the carnage that floated on the air around. “And compromise the security of *this* ship?” I asked, raising my voice against her as I had not in years. “If this ship falls, Cassandra, we are *beaten*. Do you understand? Secrecy is our only shield, or have you forgotten what happened last time that . . . *thing* got on board?”

Her nostrils flared, and falling into Jaddian, she said, “*Tariphas qel non amlo.*”

You know I haven’t.

Selene laid a hand on my arm. I flinched, saw her eyes peering up into mine, green as green. She said no word. She did not have to.

Embarrassed, I turned aside. “*Shamis mia.*”

It was I who had forgotten—not her. Danu had been a terrible trial, had for her been more terrible still. I had nearly lost my daughter. But she had nearly lost herself. It had been her hand that plunged the blade through both our hearts, her will that had been shattered, her body taken by the monster outside.

“There must be something we can do!” she exclaimed. “This ship is the greatest weapon in human history! It can destroy *suns*! Don’t tell me you’re sorry.”

“We cannot use *Astrophage*,” I said, voice firm, “not until we can confirm the Cielcin fleet is present.” I laid a hand on Selene’s, gently broke contact. “We will not have another chance.”

Cassandra raised her chin, stood ramrod straight. “There are a hundred weapons in that hold.”

“There is *Artemision*,” I said.

“Or we might try luring it into battle with the Martian fleet,” Edouard said. “The atomics . . . there may be enough of them to replicate the Perseus effect.”

I flashed a glare at the younger man. “Yes, because Perseus worked so well at Sabratha.”

Edouard said, "It might buy us time." He restored one oiled lock that had fallen across his face to its proper place. In that moment, I understood just how tired the fellow was. He was like a curtain worn thin by time, and as I looked at him it seemed I saw the light shining through.

"If the Emperor is undiscovered," I said, "let him remain that way a while longer . . ."

"Master!" Orphan interjected, voice light as air. "My master!"

"Listen! Listen to me!"

"To me! To me!" The giant shifted in its chair, leaned forward, three hands upon the arms of the black throne. It was the left-hand head that spoke, the castrato. "It is possible the gravitational weapon will have an effect."

"Do not listen to me!" said the other, glowering at its counterpart. "I am mistaken."

"Hush!" said the castrato. "Hush! Listen! A direct shot to the creature's center might be enough to capture its waveform."

The right hand reached up, turned the left face with its palm. "We do not have a clear understanding of how the line singularity will propagate across the higher spatial dimensions. To say nothing about the time dimensions."

"It would have to see the attack coming!" said the castrato, biting at its brother's fingers.

The right hand pulled away, the black-haired head growling at the white. "*Artemision* is not instantaneous. The fault line propagates near lightspeed, but that is too slow!"

"It is not!" The two left hands seized the right.

"It is!" said the basso, gold-crowned, its hook-nosed face twisted in frustration. The scar the Chantry's daimon had given it shone on its rough cheek. "You saw how it caught the Shining One!"

"Enough!" I said. "Can you do it, or can't you?"

The two faces looked at one another, hands holding hand, while about us, images of the death of the fleet flickered in silent horror.

"Hadrian."

It was Edouard. The HAPSIS man was standing at the lip of the

holography well, one hand on the comms patch behind his right ear. His eyes were lost in the glare off the holographs, shining with the light and fire of Ushara's countless limbs, spectacles reflecting spectacle.

"What?"

He stirred, and the effect vanished, eyes appearing from behind glass. "It's the Emperor," he said. "They've spotted the fleet."

If the fleet had come—if Dorayaica had come—then it was time.

It was doomsday.

"Where?"

He rattled off the coordinates, repeating the intelligence Ketevan dripped into his ear. "Above the ecliptic, out beyond Ywain."

The light from their arrival must just have reached Cynon.

"Does the Emperor know about Gododdin?" I asked.

Edouard shook his head in a way that told me it was not a denial. He simply didn't know. "They're . . . taking fire."

Lorian, I realized.

The adorator confirmed my guess a moment later. "It's Roundtable Fleet."

"What?" Selene blinked. "How?"

Was it luck? Providence? Pure chance?

Or had Lorian been prepared, planted his own surveillance satellites—unnoticed by Empire and Cielcin alike? But if he had, why had he kept them a secret?

He'd feared Minoan spies. Someone had betrayed our advance stations to the Cielcin. That was the only explanation for why we had failed to detect their warp signatures. Unless the Watchers had spied them all out on their own.

Either one was terrifying, though the former seemed the more likely, if Lorian *had* acted on intelligence. But why hadn't he telegraphed?

"How many ships?" I asked.

"They didn't say."

I needed to talk to the Emperor, to understand what was happening. I needed to do what Lorian had done, to step back—to *see*. I could get above

the fighting, get a clear picture of all that passed in the world beyond . . .
below.

But they would see me. *She* would see me.

Did I have a choice?

“Prepare to fire *Artemision*,” I said, “and prepare for warp.”

I saw Cassandra brighten, saw Orphan’s black-haired face grow dark.
“Master,” it said, “this . . . thing you want. It will fail!”

“Then it fails!” I said. “We have to try!”

“The weapon will be discovered!” Orphan pled. The left hands had released the right, but the right still clung to the wrist of the stronger left arm, its knuckles white amidst their rune-scored rings. “It will be destroyed.”

“Then let it be destroyed!” I said. “Fire the weapon! And take us to Cynon!” When the creature hesitated, I roared, “Do as I say, Orphan! Now!”

The giant shivered, fingers pawing at the countless electrodes pressed to its foreheads, its faces, its chest. Cords stood out on its neck as the black-headed one hissed, but it hastened to obey.

. . .

The stars beyond the windows ran like a woman’s paint in rain. Ten million miles vanished in an instant, and the blue glow of space became only stars .

..

. . . and there was Cynon, lifeless and grim.

While at our backs—in the space we had just vacated—there hung a thing of metal and of glass, a clockwork horror disgorged from *Demiurge*’s hollow heart. Mechanisms forged by iron wills turned, clicked into place, turning like the cylinder of Valka’s old service revolver. Engines old as Empire turned for the first time, and an arrow nearly a mile long was loosed from its chamber, while angstrom by angstrom its inner workings wound it

tighter, *tighter*, until it wound space itself, and a blade of darkness lanced across the night, a wrinkle in the fabric of the world.

Whole vessels fell from hands of pure force, things luminous as the very stars. Ushara did not turn—she did not have to. Her maker had fashioned her to see in all direction, to move in all directions at once. Her many rings rotated, eyes turned outward, encircling the light that was her. She saw the darkness coming.

The singularity pierced her heart and passed through her, dragging her photons in its wake. And she fell, fell as she had fallen once before, down, down, *down* into darkness, her body flowing like a river. The myriad rings that encircled her blazing heart all crumbled as they passed through that darkness, and the countless phantasmal arms that shone in the air about her faltered, dissolving like the mist as her light fell toward the event horizon.

I saw none of this, saw only cold, dead Cynon unrolled like a carpet beneath my feet where I stood by the tall windows. It fell to Orphan to pronounce the doom of the wretched beast, relayed by *Artemision*'s own daimon via internal telegraph.

"Target . . . destroyed!" said the black-haired head, the one gold-crowned, the face I had come to think of as the true face of the two-headed monster. It sounded shocked, turned to look at the face of its counterpart, who stared pointedly at the vaulted roof above.

"What?" I felt my stomach knot. It wasn't possible. It could not have been so simple. Ushara was not . . .

"Dead," said Orphan's castrato. "Dead. Dead."

"You're sure?" I advanced upon the holograph, joined Edouard and Cassandra by its rim.

"*Artemision* confirms it," said the castrato, a beatific smile on its colorless face.

Why then was my heart yet troubled? Cassandra was watching me, and from the shadow of doubt on her face I knew that she and I were thinking the same thing: that Ushara had appeared dead before, when in fact she was merely wounded.

And there was still Dorayaica to contend with.

“Master!” said Orphan’s basso, raising its one right hand. “The comm!”

“It is *Aurora*!” cried the castrato.

“Very good.” I turned to face the emptiness between the well and the windows.

But the silverfish did not descend. No image painted itself in the air before me. The Emperor did not appear. “*Cousin . . .*” His voice was like distant thunder, quiet but all pervading. “*The planet . . .*”

So he did know.

“*What can we do? How can we fight such . . .*” He struggled with the word.

“Evil,” I said, remembering the boy I’d been, the boy who did not believe in the word—unless it was applied to my own father.

“*Gododdin is gone, cousin—gone!*” The Emperor was as close to panic as I had ever heard him. That realization shattered me, stirred in me a terror I’d not known I could feel. The Emperor was the cornerstone, the lodestar about whom all man’s universe did turn. “*There were more than a billion people on that planet!*”

“I know,” I said.

“*How are we to fight so reckless an enemy?*” he said. “*They did not do this at Forum! They have not done this before!*”

“Because before they were fighting for plunder!” I said, speaking loudly, harshly, over his fear. “The Cielcin were raiders, cousin! Reavers! Now they’re fighting to win!”

Hesitation, made longer by the few seconds’ lag between *Aurora* and *Demiurge*. “*But Dorayaica . . .*”

“This isn’t Dorayaica!” I said. “Even Dorayaica saw itself as a conqueror! An Emperor like yourself. This is something else! This is . . . revenge.”

“*Revenge . . .*” The Emperor’s voice was strained. “*Revenge for what?*”

“For being,” I said.

The Watchers were beyond hatred.

With the Vaiartu, they had led a war across the galaxy, a war against life itself. And at the height of their majesty and power, they destroyed

themselves. What we witnessed there at Gododdin was the start of a second Great War, a war of death against life, light against darkness, of unmaking against the Unmade.

"We should have foreseen this," William said. *"You should have foreseen this."*

I could only shake my head. The Emperor was not wrong, even if he was not fair. What the Cielcin had done—the ferocity of that first assault—who but I could have foreseen it?

But I had not. Not in all my wildest imaginings . . .

Not in any of my visions . . .

I wondered at that, and grew silent. I had not been permitted a glimpse of the attack, not in all my visions. All of time had been poured through my head like water through a sieve, but I had not seen it: the moons like a hailstorm falling through our ranks.

Why had I not been granted that vision, when it might have saved so many lives?

But would it have?

"I am sorry," I said. "I did not."

"That much is plain," William said. A cough resounded over the transmission.

Did I dare tell him about the attack on Ushara? I could feel Selene's eyes on me, felt a pressure to speak. And yet . . . if we were wrong . . .

"What of the fleet?" I asked.

They ought to have appeared on our holograph by then, out beyond the orbit of Ywain. I turned to face the holograph, saw Orphan had widened the display to cover the whole of the star system.

There they were. Light after light winking into existence out beyond the further suns—already their number beyond counting.

"They have come," William said.

"Are you discovered here?"

"How can we not be?" asked the Emperor. *"Space is a desert, Lord Marlowe. There is nothing in the desert, and nowhere to hide."* Almost I

could picture him bent in his throne, his face sheathed in dull gold. *“But they have not attacked us yet. They make war with your Extrasolarians.”*

My Extrasolarians . . .

“Is Dharan-Tun among them?” I asked. The Empire was sure to have better intelligence.

“I don’t know . . .” he said. Not since Perfugium had I heard him so weary. *“I don’t think we know . . .”* At once the Emperor seemed to rally, and when he spoke again, it was in a voice sharper, clearer, more direct. *“Is your weapon prepared?”*

He meant *Astrophage*.

I looked to Orphan, who compressed both its mouths. We had deployed *Astrophage* a long, long time before, on the day we’d first arrived in Gododdin system. The destruction of Eidyn had been used as cover, in case we’d encountered opposition to the plan. But it was not primed, and so I said simply: “Not yet.”

“Then make ready.”

I hesitated. “Once I begin the firing sequence, the chances of the weapon’s being detected increase dramatically. There is a risk the Watchers may intervene.”

“Then we must distract them,” said the Emperor. *“We must draw Dorayaica into the open . . .”* I knew what he was going to say before he said it. *“I will reveal myself. We will draw them into battle.”*

“No!” I said, so violently I startled poor Selene. More gently then, I said again, “No, William. Your people need you.”

“You would have your friend face them alone?”

“No,” I said. “Send the fleet. Send Bassander Lin, Lord Kosis. But save yourself. You are the Emperor—”

“I am an old man,” said William the Aventine. *“And dying.”*

“You are the Emperor!” I said again. “Mankind itself! Your people need you, *will* need you, when all is done.” I steeled myself, knowing what I must say. What I must do. “And it is not you Dorayaica wants. It is not you it fears . . .” I could feel Cassandra’s eyes on me, a knife between my shoulders. “I will go myself.”

Orphan wailed. "Master, you must not!"

I rounded on the giant, hoping the Emperor could still hear me. "I will go alone!" I said. "It is I that Dorayaica wants. I will ride out and face it. Dorayaica will not be able to resist. Its eye and those of its gods will be fixed on me, and while they are distracted . . ." Violet eyes held Orphan's black ones. "You will detonate *Astrophage*."

"You can't!" Selene's voice was broken glass, her eyes deep pools as she seized my arm.

I pulled myself free.

"No," said the Emperor. "*I won't allow it.*"

"You must!" I said. "You have my blood, cousin! Do with it what you will! But lead your people to safety."

Selene caught my wrist again. "I need you!" she hissed, looking to Cassandra for aid. "We need you!"

"You need me to do this," I said, looking to the holograph. "I am no Emperor!"

"And I am no Empress!" said she.

"The princes of the Chantry are dead," I said. "I have taken their mask from them for you. The way is straight." I approached her, laid a hand upon her face.

Her eyes closed, and she pressed her cheek into my palm. "Husband," she said, "I have waited for you . . . for such a *long time*."

"I was never yours to wait for," I said, and looked toward the stars. "My place is there: between mankind and her enemies." I did not take my hand away, not at once. "The galaxy will need your kindness, Princess. You must bandage its wounds."

"*I cannot allow this,*" said the Emperor.

"Neither can you stop me," said I. "I will go to Dharan-Tun myself."

I could feel Selene tremble. "But you'll die!"

One black tear fled her shuttered eye. I wiped it clean. "It wouldn't be the first time," I said, and I stooped and kissed her. "Smile, Selene. This is not the end."

I drew away, knowing I must make haste, lest the Emperor move before

I could.

“I am going,” I said. “Orphan, a word.”

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CHAPTER 72

DARKNESS AND SILENCE

“WHERE DO YOU THINK you’re going?”

The words I most feared—and most expected—chased me down the hall.

I must have hurried past her, hidden as she was in shadow, in one pilastered niche in the broad corridor. She must have gone ahead of me, rushed toward the shuttle port while I conferred with Orphan and Edouard.

She stepped out of the darkness, armored in the ivory of Empire, with her *mandyas* over all, and when I turned to see her, she stepped square into the center of the corridor at my back, hand on hip. Her short hair wildly framed her face, and there was a sharpness in her that told me—and told me plain—that she would not be denied.

“To Dharan-Tun. Alone.”

“Not alone.” She took a step, eyes keen and bright as lasers in the gloom. “I’m going with you.”

I hesitated. “Anaryan . . .”

“Don’t *Anaryan* me!” she said. “You needed me at Danu. You need me now. I can—”

“Cassandra!” I felt my hands become fists. I willed myself to open them. “I am not coming back.”

She hardly moved. Her posture and her voice were brittle as shale. “You think I don’t know that? I was on the bridge.”

There was so little time. I had to draw the eye of Miudanar and of Ushara both, to hold their attention long enough to give the fleet a chance—long enough to deploy *Astrophage*. But I could not let her come, though it break her heart. “I am doing this for you,” I said. “For your future.”

“Mia melontipha!” My future. Cassandra beat her breast. *“Abba. Mia! It is mine to spend!”*

“It is,” I said, “but there is no future where I am going. There is only Death.”

“Death does not frighten me!” she exclaimed. “I have been dead before. I know what awaits us! If we die, we go to Amma together.”

It was like speaking to myself. She had become my reflection—a thing terrible to behold.

I drew back a step. “I did not want this life for you.”

“I don’t want this for *you*,” she said, turning my words back upon me.

“There is no alternative,” I said.

“Maybe not,” she agreed. “But you don’t have to do this alone.”

“I am doing this *for you*,” I said again, gesturing at the doors to the bridge behind her. “For all of them.”

Cassandra pitched her jaw. “You think Selene wouldn’t rather have you alive?”

“Selene . . .” Her words were like a blow. “I don’t . . . I’m not . . .”

“She needs you.” Cassandra took a step. “I need you.” Her jaw was clenched, her words escaping through teeth almost wired shut. “If I go, you won’t throw your life away for nothing.”

Something moved in the hall behind me, twin shadows, horn-crowned.

Ramanthanu and Otomno were standing there, garbed in black and red. Seeing them, I looked to Cassandra. She hated the Cielcin, feared them—recalling Sabratha more sharply than I. For her to go to them, or to allow them to come . . .

She was truly desperate. But she had won.

I could not pass the Pale without a fight.

The way had gone straight at last. The labyrinth was ended. No turn was there then: neither left nor right. The path was clear, the gates shattered.

There was only forward.

Only down.

• • •

The shuttle flickered to life as we crossed the threshold, the whole ship lumbering awake system by tired system. The relief opposite the airlock showed the image of some ancient war: a solitary aircraft flying over a city of high towers while a dragon soared to meet it. It seemed a fitting omen.

"I thought we were taking *Ascalon*," said Cassandra, just behind me.

"This will be faster," I said, not looking at her. I hurried toward the bridge, lights coming on with every step, leading the way forward. Reaching the door, I halted, and looking back saw Ramanthanu and Otomno standing silent not two paces behind the young woman. "And there is much aboard *Ascalon* I do not want lost."

I punched the manual controls to open the door, felt a rush of dead, dry air.

The bridge was dark, and bare as the bridge of all those frigates was bare, without consoles or furnishing beyond the single, central chair.

"Daimon, awake," I said.

"*Acknowledging.*" The shuttle's voice was flatly masculine. It sounded tired, almost bored.

"How long before the ship can be ready for departure?" I asked.

The daimon pretended to think about its answer for half a moment. "*Report: This vessel can be prepared for departure in T-minus seven minutes.*"

I cursed. "See it done."

"Do you think the Emperor will make some move?" Cassandra asked.

"He'll do what he can," I said. "Whatever he thinks he can." Beyond the forward window, the doors to the hold were shut. I could see three of the *uthras* clambering over one another in their haste to reach the end of a strut that helped hold the vessel below us in place.

I sank into the pilot's seat, feeling every Planck second of my age, knowing that each passing moment brought us nearer to disaster.

"Where is Darathama?" I asked, looking to my two Cielcin, the last survivors of those who had seen me wound their god.

Somewhat to my surprise, it was Otomno who answered, its short hair

standing out behind its epoccipital crest, stiff as wire. “With the other children.”

The other children . . . I thought, recalling the way I had seen it at play with Kit and the Danuan children. “Did you tell it you would not return?”

The two Cielcin looked at one another. “Darathama knows,” said Ramanthanu.

“Should not one of you stay behind?” I asked, looking to Otomno, who seemed the proper choice.

The inferior Cielcin twitched its head in the Cielcin negative, but it was Ramanthanu who answered, saying, “*Iazyr Kulah* awaits.”

“Paradise . . .” I said. *Iazyr Kulah* was the Cielcin spirit realm, the halls of dust to which the spirits of the dead departed, where it was said the souls of those *godsborne* would dwell, beyond the confines of time and space, residing with the Watchers eternally.

There was no such place—not as the Cielcin understood it. No feasting hall of the victorious dead. No garden of unearthly delights. In my silence then, I realized how little I still knew of the Pale’s beliefs. What dark promises had their gods made to Elu, so very long ago? Dominion over *this* world—that much was plain. The strength to command the stars. An empire to outlast the aeons.

But life eternal?

“You have been there,” said the lop-horned captain, looking from Cassandra to myself. “Both of you.”

“And you wish to go there, is that it?” I asked.

“Who could not?” asked Otomno.

I studied both their chalk-white faces. Ramanthanu was by far the larger of the two, towering head and horn above its mate. Its braid was long, its armor of finer make—black and articulated like the shell of some shining scarab. Otomno was smaller, broader of hip and beam, had shorn its hair to indicate that it had borne a child.

Ramanthanu spoke in halting standard. “We would go to Utannash,” it said. “He is great among the gods. Greater than the gods of Elu and Avarra. I have seen this.” Ramanthanu fingered the shield pack at its waist as it

spoke, though its eyes were on something beyond the window glass at my back. “Utannash has judged the children of Elu and their slaves, and will destroy them.”

“Should not Darathama be counted a child of Utannash?” asked Otomno, speaking Cielcin. “*Rakayu oyade tutai ioman ne?*”

Is this not better?

“You would abandon the child to get there?” I asked them plain.

Neither showed any sign of hesitation or remorse. “We are sons of Elu,” said Ramanthanu, taking Otomno by the hand. “Much of what we know is *not*, and so we can but lead the child to what is not.”

“It is better . . .” Otomno hesitated, speaking the tongue of man with much stammering, “if the boy is . . .”

“Human,” said Ramanthanu.

“Human!” Cassandra sneered. “You’re Cielcin!”

“They’re not!” I said, looking sharply up at her. “They’re something else.”

Away below our feet, the ship was coming all to life. The reactor had started to whine, and the floor shook faintly, like the head of a drum struck long before.

“To be Cielcin is to be *godsborne*,” I said to her, not rising from my chair. I gestured at the two xenobites. “But they have renounced their gods.” A question that had recurred in my mind a hundred thousand times at last burst forth. “What were you called—your people—before Elu?”

Ramanthanu and Otomno looked at one another, faces blank.

The captain at last gave answer. “*Sim u beluton.*”

No one knows.

I had expected that answer, still it shocked me to my foundations. Their whole history had been forgotten, ploughed over, buried under millennia of shifting sand. They were a people with no name, no concept beyond their relationship with the gods that had twisted them out of shape.

Here, then, was a kind of miracle: A saltation. The Y-chromosomal Adam and Mitochondrial Eve of a new race sprung full-formed from the wounded flank of the old. They did not see their value, or understand it—

members of a newborn and endangered species, one speciated not by blood, but in spirit.

I could not let them die.

“We go to face the Prophet?” Ramanthanu asked. “To kill her?”

Her. It was a struggle following the Cielcin logic in human speech. “Yes,” I said. “To Dharan-Tun.”

“How do you plan to get there?” Cassandra asked. “They’ll shoot us down, even if you announce yourself. They can’t risk keeping you alive.”

“They can’t risk killing me,” I said. “Dorayaica fears killing me. Not until it’s certain of the circumstances.”

I checked my terminal. Two minutes remained. Too many.

“We’ll warp as close as we can. This ship’s computer should get us fairly low, under the worst of their guns. We’ll make the surface, and I’ll announce myself to them.” I smiled sadly, not stating my true intentions. “We have only to hold their attention so long as we can . . .”

An alarm rang on my terminal, and distantly I heard the alarm bells toll.

“Hadrian!” It was Edouard. “We’re getting reports! The fleet—” He broke off, clearly shaken. “You need to see this.”

“What is it?” I asked, not sure how to see what the other man was seeing. “What’s happening?”

What he said next did not surprise me, though it blackened my very heart. “The Monumental,” he said. “It’s found us.”

“Found us?” I asked.

“The fleet!” Edouard said. “It’s here! And Orphan says a portion of the Cielcin fleet at Ywain just broke away. They’re coming here . . .”

So Ushara was not dead after all.

“Is *Artemision* intact?” I asked.

“Orphan can’t get a signal!” said Edouard.

I heard a sound in my soul like the stone door of a tomb grinding shut, and knew I could no longer turn back.

I imagined fingers long as shadows closing about *Aurora*, rending the vessel like paper.

Every second brought destruction.

Only I could make it stop.

• • •

Darkness.

Silence.

Night.

We passed from the hold, along a flume like the ventricle of some almighty iron heart and out into the desert of space. Cynon rolled beneath us, lifeless and gray. There was no sound, but for the beating of my heart, the coming of my breath, the distant rumble of the engines—as of some chthonic deity far off, groaning, softer than the hammer in my blood.

They will see us, I said. We had left *Demiurge*'s protection. *Any moment, they will see us*.

To their eye, the shuttle would have simply appeared, would have emerged—as it seemed—from nothing at all. And when they realized *I* was aboard?

Ushara would abandon her place among the ships of the fleet and rush to meet us. I half expected to see her in the void outside, her eyes all black and glaring.

But she did not appear.

An instant later, a flash like a second sun arose over the limn of the dead planet. Another. Another. Like lightning in the belly of a storm it was, and indeed it seemed a storm filled the sky above that airless world, black clouds like shadows rising.

"What is that?" Cassandra asked, moving past me to stand at the forward windows.

"The Emperor's atomics," I said, understanding. He had ordered them unleashed, had turned them against the Watcher. He knew the literature, knew about the Nairi Expedition, the *Atropos*, and Project Perseus. He knew the monsters were susceptible to radiation. "They won't be enough."

Silence again, while beyond our little window—somewhere in the night

—the inhuman fleet was moving. A phalanx of Cielcin worldships had broken from the greater horde and, circling round Ywain like bolos in the hands of some cosmic hunter, hurled themselves at Cynon. That one was destined to strike that corpse of the world I had no doubt. The warp drives of the Cielcin fleet had spent themselves carrying the fleet to the system in the first place, could not fire again—not for days. But the engines—vast as kingdoms—that the Prophet’s legions had hewn into craters on each worldship’s face were enough to drive each vessel to nearly a quarter of light’s speed.

It was fast enough. Anything short of total destruction of the Cielcin fleet could not save Cynon. But the Imperial fleet was already moving, burning hard from orbit, and from the monster that had emerged in their midst.

Terrible she was as Death herself—pure and radiant—a living sun. The rings that encircled her emanation turned like the workings of some enormous clock.

“How big do you think she is?” asked Cassandra.

I saw one hand, its ghostly shoulder rooted in nothing near the outmost ring, reach out and seize an Imperial battleship.

Ramathanu swore an oath so foul in its native tongue.

“Bigger than *Demiurge*,” I said in answer, knowing it did not matter. The creature’s body was—in a sense—only an image. She was light itself, pure energy and will.

Otomno fell to its knees. “*Dō Caeharush . . .*” it intoned, earning a blow from its mate.

“Utannash is your god!” it hissed. “Do not forget it.”

Cassandra’s hand became a fist, hammered the glass. “You really think we can kill her?”

I could feel her hatred, her terror.

I knew that I should go to her, should lay a hand upon her shoulder, should draw her to myself as I had so many nights when she was young and lived in terror of the dark. But I could not. To go to her was to stay with her, and I knew I could not stay. She had come with me to make an end—as had

the two who were once Cielcin, who now were something else. They were precious—each of them in their way, and had their parts yet to play in the changing universe.

As had I.

But the time had come for me to play mine, while their time . . . their time is not yet come.

Wordless then, I turned, passed the towering xenobites, and left the quiet bridge.

Ushara had not seen me, nor had Miudanar and Dorayaica. I could feel them searching, questing in the night. They would find me soon, and gather me to themselves. The time had come to tempt Fate, and battle the very gods of night, and whether or not my daughter would allow it—I would face them all alone.

It was what I was made for, what He had called me from my wretched wandering to *be*.

His instrument. His justice.

I did not get far.

I was halfway down the corridor before Cassandra noticed my departure. I heard the door hiss open once more. “What are you doing?”

“Stay on the bridge, Cassandra!” I said, not looking back. Orpheus had looked back. I pulled my coif up over my head, thumped the controls to conjure my helm from its hiding place about my throat.

I had hoped to depart unnoticed.

“Abba! Stop!”

She must have known what I was doing, whither I was bound. I could hear a shrill note in her voice, a panic so unlike herself. Her feet hammered down the hall behind me.

I punched the control at my right to close the latitudinal bulkhead. It slammed closed behind me.

“Abba!” Her voice came through badly muffled, but her fury was plain to hear. She hammered on the door, but could not open it. She would have to ask the daimon to override. It would comply, but it would take her a moment to think to ask the beast for aid, I knew. I turned, and placed my

hand against the door, felt her blows reverberate. “*Abba! Kardaha qesta porta!*”

I thought of her mother then, sundered from me by so much fallen stone.

It was steel this time, and this time it was I who was not coming back.

“*Ti ahba,*” I said, and turned.

I felt the tide rise about my feet, the ebb and flow of the quantum foam pulling at my ankles, and looking back, I saw her face—saw her *through* the metal of the door as my vision stretched and blurred. She was incandescent with rage. But her eyes were shining, her cheeks wet with tears.

She knew what I was doing, where I was going . . . and that she could not follow.

I took my first step, and left the nameless shuttle behind.

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CHAPTER 73

PANDAEMONIUM

I FELT SNOW BENEATH my feet, heard the rotten crush of ice under my heels. The world was dead and cold, silent as any crypt. The distant stars were buried by the flash and clamor of weapons far nearer and far more bright, while directly above my head, the planet Ywain hung—its face nigh all in darkness, its edges shining like those of some dull coin brought up from the earth after millennia of solitude. Pale gold it was, and umber, and ochre, and black, its night side thick with thunder blue and livid white.

No wind was there, nor air, nor sound but that of my own heart and breathing.

Surely this was Dharan-Tun, the very heart of hell.

I had made the journey undetected.

A flash filled the sky above me—brighter than any day. I knew a vessel had died. White light gave way to red flame, red flame to darkness. I saw my shadow—long as years—stretched upon the snow. The Prophet had brought its world into orbit around that outer planet, made it one moon among many. I could see other ships—other moons—not far off in the sky above, their craters gleaming with hellish light, each little world a candle-lighted skull.

The greatest part of the horde lay beyond the planet, falling sunward toward Cynon and the final battle. They would smash through the Martian line like elephants through infantry.

Unless I stopped them.

But I was alone in the desert, and there was nothing. No door, no crater, no way into the world below. I had emerged from the space beyond space somewhere on the worldship's surface, on some plateau or plain of level ice. I could see nothing all the way to the horizon.

Nothing but *white*.

Another flash filled the heavens, and by its light I saw—like the distant shadows of birds—the shapes of human ships carved against the darkness. Massive ships, great perhaps as *Demiurge* herself, carving their paths of destruction.

They were Lorian's ships. I recognized their design at once, their cigar shapes turning in the night. And there! That might have been the *Mistwalker* itself, the Supreme Commandant's own flagship.

I could save him. I could save *all* of them.

Another flash of fire. Another ship destroyed.

I had not gone quite far enough . . . there was a little way left to go.

And so I took another step. Not through space, but overland.

It would not be long before they found me. Either the xenobites . . . or their gods.

I could sense them—both of them—their blazing eyes like torches all their own, burning in the night above me. They had not seen my passage between worlds.

My feet left red marks in the ice, bruised places where the water mingled with hydrated salt. Epsomite. Vitriol. The very world was bleeding.

The light of battle flared far overhead, carved shadows on the snow, or else abolished dark entirely, so that I moved through a landscape of unalloyed white.

I moved not like a man alone, but as one at the head of a mighty host, for it seemed to me my dead walked with me—their feet leaving no mark on the mortal world. Somewhere in my soul, a cornicen winded his crystal clarion, and a herald—gruff Pallino, I could hear his voice—cried out: “Let this Prophet-King tremble! The Halfmortal has come!”

Behind me then, my host shook their spears and stamped—ninety thousand strong—and the thunder of their heels was like a hammer on the head of Dharan-Tun.

“Halfmortal! Halfmortal! Halfmortal!”

Their voices might have bruised the ears of the very gods, and again the

trumpet played. Somewhere in my heart, a deep drum resounded, merged with the noise of marching feet, the crunch of snow beneath my boots.

Valka took my hand—I did not turn to look at her, though I smelled her old perfume. She said no word to me. She had said it all before.

“Open the gates!” Pallino roared. “Come on out, you worm! Come out!”

“Forward, the Red Company!” cried some other voice. Crim’s, or perhaps Durand’s.

Still I felt Valka’s hand in mine, felt other hands upon my back. As those dead—when living—had pulled me from the space before the temple steps after I had wounded Dorayaica at the altar stone, those living—then dead—pushed me forward then. I felt their hands upon my back, my shoulders—forever felt dear Valka’s hand in mine.

I was not alone. My dead walked with me.

“Death! Death!” cried those unheard voices.

Death had come to Dharan-Tun. Death to the Pale and all their kind. Death to their Prophet and their gods. Death, and Justice.

“For Earth and Empire!”

“For the Red Company!”

“For the Halfmortal! The Halfmortal!”

“Hadrian Halfmortal!”

No, I thought—or said. *Say rather*, For the Absolute.

“For the Absolute!”

“The Absolute!”

“For him! For him!”

“You’ll see it done.”

I stopped.

A deep chasm lay before me, a canal carved into the ice, its walls red with salt and acid. Nature had fashioned it, but inhuman hands had worked it deeper still. There was a door far below—the very gate Pallino’s shade had spoken of. Seeing it, my dead let out a cry, and with that sound dissolved like a dream. The light of battle overhead threw my shadow on the wall before me—vast as kings.

That shadow stood alone.

I felt something through my boots. A distant *crack*. Somewhere not far off, a sheet of ice had broken. There came a crunching, grinding sound—faint as my own breathing. I turned my head, and saw two Cielcin *scaharimn* clambering up stairs from the abyss before me, blades already drawn. Though we stood in vacuum, they wore only filter masks, their visors white as the faces they concealed. Their long hair and open sleeves floated stiffly in the void. They carried lances—weapons taken from the hands of fallen legionnaires—and trained them at my chest.

I spread my hands. I knew they would not kill me. Cautious then, their leader advanced, head tilted to one side, not taking its bayonet from my face.

It must have recognized me. My badge and tokens were known.

Slowly then, it reached out with one clawed hand, seized the sword hilt at my waist and swiftly tugged the weapon free.

I offered no resistance.

Then another of the Pale—one I had not heard—seized me roughly from behind, pinned my arms and bound my wrists. I let it happen, stood calmly by while they searched me, took from me my sidearm, my shield pack, my knife. By some minor miracle—ignorance, perhaps—they left my terminal on my gauntlet.

I said no word. Not when they spurred me toward the ravine, not when they shoved me down the stairs, or kicked me when I had fallen. The armor took the worst of it, gel layer hardening to soften every blow, and when they'd had their play, they offered me no help in standing, but jostled one another, overcome by their seeming good fortune. I lay there a moment, curled on the landing at the base of that iron stair before the airlock. There was still a long way to the bottom of the canyon, five hundred cubits or more.

Unhelped by my inhuman captors, I found my knees, got one foot up under myself.

Another foot struck me on my back, knocked me to the deck once more. I felt a foot press on my helmet, and looking up, saw the warrior posturing, raising its long arms while its companions looked on. They had captured the

Oranganyr, the Champion of Utannash, their Prophet's greatest foe. They asked no questions, seemed neither to wonder nor care how I had come to that place.

Their gods had delivered me into their hands, and that was enough.

At last they seized me, hauled me to my feet. They made me walk before them, along the platform toward the gateway I had seen. A narrow bridge stretched above the chasm, led to an open airlock. But one of the Cielcin went ahead of me, moving to join its sister-brothers by the gate. I held my head up high—a sign of defeat to the creatures, a sign of defiance from me—and crossed to the open portal.

The door slid closed, and at once the black chamber was filled with a roar and shout of wind. The Cielcin turned their heads, breath masks trailing hoses from the left side.

“Kizara-kih! Rigarn-kih! Tagutta ba-qaishan wo!” said one taller than the rest.

I stood very still, permitting the two called Kizara and Rigarn to approach. They pawed at me with dumb fingers, struggling to understand—to locate—the mechanisms that would manually release my casque. I offered no assistance, uttered no word. Kizara's hands grew more fevered, scrabbling, frustrated with the human design. It lashed at me, struck me across the face with a pointed elbow. The force of it turned my head.

“It will not open, Uthamna-doh!”

The sergeant, Uthamna, shoved its slave-subordinate aside. “Enough of that, Kizara, you *ietum*! You'll break her!” It seized me by the shoulders. “This one is for Himself, you know? He's for the Dhar-Iagon, soon as the general arrives.”

“Uja vatatyr-do, yelnumba sha ti-saem-gi ne?” asked Rigarn, tipping its head as it sidled nearer.

Vatatyr? I looked from the smaller creature to Uthamna. *Vatatyr* was *father, parent, donor*. This little trio of door wardens was a family.

“Ask her where her ship is!” said Uthamna, seizing Kizara by one horn and twisting it toward me, making Kizara yelp. “You know her mongrel words!”

“Rutotolo o-tajarin! Rutotta! Rutotta!” said Rigarn. *Ask it! Ask it!*

Kizara shuffled nearer, struck me again without warning, seized my shoulders, and—shaking me—said, “Where. Is. Your . . . ship?”

“Siajeyu o-velatadiu.”

The xenobites all recoiled, seemingly shocked to hear their words issuing from my mouth. I confess I felt a spasm of amusement. There I was: a thousand years the nemesis of their sunken race—a living legend, the monster their children feared—and they were shocked to find I spoke their words.

“There is no ship,” I said again.

Kizara struck me with the back of one fist, succeeded in turning my head once more. *“Iugam!”* it said. *You lie!*

“This one is *Utannashi!*” said Uthamna, the elder. “All it speaks are lies.”

“You would not know the truth if you heard it,” I said, and earned another blow from the stripling.

Angered, Uthamna thrust its spawn aside, seized me, and shook me. “Where are your allies?”

I said nothing.

Uthamna hissed, the noise of it muffled by the breathing mask. The creature—that least slave of Palekind—tore the Imperial cloak from my shoulders. Fingers twice as long as human fingers scratched at my mask, found the catches. The helmet opened, detached from the underlayment. For the first time in so many centuries, I tasted the air of Dharan-Tun.

It was bitter cold, and the stink of alien bodies filled the airlock, hand in hand with other smells: burnt wiring, raw iron, wet stone. Still in my captor’s hands, I shut my eyes to stop the tears from coming. The smell . . . I was in my cell again, crawling on the floor. The memory of it brought no terror, brought only sorrow . . .

For the man I had been.

For the creatures that had then made me what I was.

“Where are you allies?”

Uthamna struck my naked face.

“Where are your allies? Your people?” Its voice was flattened. “You cannot have come alone!”

Still in the creature’s grip, I smiled, said, “*Raka Utannash vaa ti-koun.*”
Utannash is with me.

Uthamna’s grip broke, and it drew back, hand raised as though I had burned it. “Utannashi!”

A rough hand seized me by the scruff of my neck, tore the coif from my head. “*Tajun’ta ti-saem-gi ne?*”

Where are they?

Face twisted toward the ceiling by the hand then in my hair, I said, “There is no one.”

“Liar!”

I made no move.

“How did you come here?” Uthamna asked. The other had not yet released my hair. “Where is your ship? What are your numbers?”

I hardly heard it, for as it spoke, I felt a presence in the room. A shadow on my mind, a thing empyrean, burning with a vaporous black flame.

“There is no ship,” I said, addressing the shadow. “I came on foot.”

“What does she mean?” asked one of the younger creatures.

“It is nothing!” said Uthamna. “*Iugasa Utannashi.* She would deceive us.”

“You know I speak the truth,” I said, still speaking to the shadow.

Thinking I addressed it, Uthamna’s lips peeled back from its hideous teeth. It was holding my sword, I realized, and struggled a moment with the triggers. The blade spasmed to life in its hands, blue-white and radiant, filling the dim room with a light like the light of stars. The creatures flinched only at the blade’s sudden appearance. The warden had forgotten that its masters wanted me for Dhar-Iagon, forgotten its general, and its god. It was alone in its mind, with its spawn, and the witch-demon that I was to its kind.

It raised its hand to slay me—and screamed, recoiling as its arm fell from its shoulder with a gout of blood like ink.

The shadow shifted, its tremendous bulk rippling the surface of our

world as a whale does water. The three Cielcin seemed not to notice its presence, but I knew . . .

. . . the Prophet had struck off its thrall's right arm.

"*Vatatyr-do!*" Kizara said, rushing to its parent's side. Rigarn's hand twisted in my hair and forced me to my knees.

"What did you do?" the younger creature hissed.

Nothing. I did not say the word, knowing it could but fall on deaf ears.

Uthamna howled and cursed with pain, tore the mask from its face with its one remaining limb. The whole apparatus struck the floor with a *crack*, mask still dangling from its long hose. Blood streamed from the stump of its arm, and it sank to its knees as Kizara said, "Let me see! We must stop the bleeding."

Inu.

The word was like a shadow itself, one heard by the mind, not the ear.

La.

In-na.

Azot.

Ou.

Veih!

This last, at least, the Cielcin heard, and Kizara froze, knowing the voice for what it was: the voice of its Prophet-King . . . and its god.

Nidin kī imât.

Taba ti tel.

Wemma ni.

it said.

Let it die.

Kizara drew back, pressed its face to the floor, exposing the softer skull behind its crest, that its lord and god might step upon it.

Every shadow in the room grew darker, black as the blood pooling on the floor.

Raka Utannashie ba-kousun . . .

The Utannashi is mine . . .

Uthamna was still upright, clutching its wounded arm with its free hand.

It had minutes left.

“I will save you,” I said, unafraid of the shadow or its voice. “Free my hands.”

The warden snarled. “You think me a fool! You can do nothing! The Great One has spoken! His word is truth!”

“Your god kills you to spare my life,” I said. “You would still serve him?” I could sense Uthamna’s hesitation. “Free my hands, and you shall live a while longer.” Not a one of us moved. The fingers in my hair slackened their grip, and I knew the child was thinking on my words.

It did not want to see its parent slain, whatever the word of its god.

Yet why did I offer them reprieve? They would be dead in hours, no matter what they chose. But *choosing* . . . they might choose another way, and so walk a different road at the end of their existence. The seeds were in them, as they are in all things. Evolution might have made the Cielcin into monsters, but they need not remain so. There was change, and redemption, and a *chance*.

Uthamna spat at me, its bile foul in the still air. “*Psaqato ni wemuri*,” it said, “I would rather die than submit to the Liar and his *slave*.”

“*Iyadan ne?*” I echoed the doomed beastman. “Slave? I am the only one here free to act at all. You are a slave, Uthamna-kih. You were born a slave—but you need not die one.”

Slowly then, with dreadful effort, the Cielcin thrall went from two knees to one, then *stood*, swaying, towering over me. “I serve . . .” it said, voice strained, words coming slow, “a living god.”

“No,” I said, addressing the thrall and the shadow over and behind it, “your god is as dead as you soon will be.” I inclined my head to the white hand gripping the wounded stump. “If you believe what you say, take your hand away.”

Uthamna hesitated.

In the end, it let its hand fall.

“*Vatatyr!*” Kizara lurched toward Uthamna, and at once was lifted from its feet, as though some unseen hand had seized it by its throat. Its long legs

flailed, hands scrabbling at its neck to break the shadow's grip. Behind me, Rigarn's feet left the ground, and turning I saw it, too, strangled in thin air.

Uthamna looked on, eyes wide and black with pain to see the death of its daughter-sons.

"*Veih . . .*" it breathed, and withdrew a step. "*Ba-Elusha . . . veih . . .*"

Both Cielcin striplings struck the floor then, dead.

"You see?" I asked. "You see the truth?"

Uthamna bared its fangs. "We go . . ." it said, "to paradise." Then it released its severed arm, and—swaying where it stood—it fell.

I was alone in a room of dead things.

Alone with the shadow.

"You killed them," I said, a hollow forming in the pit of my stomach.

They were mine to kill.

"You're wrong," I said. "Both of you."

My mind was filled with the image of leering fangs, of feral smiles, and bloody lips.

Is that why you have come?

Atta sha lā mimma? Kersum isikkim?

Mareruri o-koarin?

To lecture me? the shadow asked.

"No," I said. "I have to come to set you free."

Neither Miudanar nor Dorayaica spoke then, though still their shadow remained—a pressure on my mind, as of countless atmospheres. Uthamna's body lay before me, blood slowly spreading on the rough stone floor. I watched its progress. Steadily it crept toward the creature's own severed limb, made to join the blood that seeped from that appendage. My sword lay before me, tumbled from the warden's nerveless fingers.

The blood had nearly reached it.

You think to offer yourself in exchange for your race . . .

Tuka e manasie . . .

Awīlūtumka pāna intaqiniāshim.

Yūf.

Meat.

Gushkin.

Gold.

Shwi.

Blood.

Uja dein tuka ne?

Atta mutum ishtēn.

. . . but one cannot pay for all.

It was my turn to say nothing.

Who are you?

Deni tsuareu oyumn tuka ne?

Shuduka!

Dohanu amiran!

It was not Dorayaica who asked, but the parasite god.

We cannot die . . .

Im tel ipamis.

Am homtoḥ ipamis.

You cannot kill us.

You must submit.

Takammas.

She offers you her hand!

Qātumsha! Rēmumsha!

Take it!

Take her!

Or die!

Biqu o-koarin.

Im tedol.

You will die.

“Perhaps,” I said. “But it won’t be the first time.”

The shadow turned from me, dismissing me as a giant might a fly. The weight of its gaze vanished.

I felt myself alone, and wondered—wondered if the beast was right.

Was it pride that had borne me to this pass? Or desperation? Or simple foolishness?

Uthamna’s blood touched my sword at last.

. . .

It must have been an hour before the inner doors opened, revealing another trio of figures—they were all the same figure—at the head of a group of white-armored, black-robed guards.

“You!” said the *vayadan*-general, Hushansa. “After all these years!”

“I would not be proud of this achievement, General,” I said calmly, still kneeling upon the grated metal floor. “I came of my own free will.”

“To beg for the life of your people!” it said, voice emanating from all three of its horn-crowned metal forms, “For all your mongrel race!”

Smiling, I said, “It is for your own people I have come. For your master—and for you.” I stood before they could make me stand. “Take me to him.”

The light in Hushansa’s three solitary eyes flickered as it shifted, the centermost of its three bodies advancing, peering down at me with malefic intent. It raised one hand—a jointed construction of titanium and adamant, its fingers sharp as knives—and touched my once-scarred cheek. “You think by erasing his mark you can change the truth?” it asked, voice flat, deep, artificially human. It spoke in standard, with an Extrasolarian accent. “You are his, have been his since the day you first came to this place.” It straightened, head swiveling with a noise of servos to look at its two other selves. “You had no choice but to return. It is *emumete*. Rightness. Justice. Fate that you should be here.” It drew its hand away. “It is the end.”

“It is,” I agreed.

Without warning, the monster’s whole arm vanished entirely, and before I could react—before I could break time and so spare myself—the back of the *vayadan*’s hand cracked the side of my face. It must have pulled its punch at the last moment, for the weight of that iron hand ought to have removed my head entire. I fell sprawling.

My ears rang and my world swam through dark water.

“You are already dead!” the general crowed, voice issuing from every one of its bodies. “The animal part of you just doesn’t know it! You are beaten! That is why you are here!” One jointed hand reached out and seized me, lifted me bodily from the floor. “Your fleet is in ruins. Vati destroyed it! His sacrifice has made him great among the gods! He rushes to join them

even now, and *you!*” The hand tightened about my chest. “*He* will drink the blood of your children from the hollows of your own skull. Your flesh will feed his slaves, when they have emptied themselves in your corpse. You are nothing! You will be *less* than nothing, like all your kind!”

I could say nothing, not with its hand crushing the life from my breast.

But there was nothing to say. Hushansa was a slave, nothing more than an appendage of the Prophet’s unholy will, a *finger* of his White Hand.

I had not come to bicker with the Prophet’s dog.

It hurled me to the floor, so that my head struck the stone and set my mind to ringing.

At some unheard spasm of the general’s will, its other selves advanced and seized my either arm. They hauled me to my feet, held me before the general’s one-eyed gaze. “You want to see him? You think it is *your* will?” One metal finger touched the place between my eyes. “It is *his*. All is *his* will.”

All three of Hushansa’s bodies spoke then in unison, their harmony filling that dimly lighted space. “He is a god now, *yukajji*.”

“He is *your* god,” said the one before me, and gave a sign. “And he awaits you.”

At Hushansa’s sign, the ranks of soldiers behind the tripartite general opened, scimitars gleaming redly in the light, held at the ready, long hilts tucked into the crook of each arm.

How must I have looked to them, in that moment? A legend made flesh, a giant shadow shrinking to reveal . . . what? We are so small when measured against their kind. A race of malformed dwarves. *This* was the Champion of Utannash?

The shadow yet hung upon the air, its unseen eyes forever watchful. I felt its motion, as one feels the passage of a cloud high and far above, imagined it as the shadow of an almighty hand, stretched out from the depths of the planet.

I felt its fingers closing in about me as I was led into the inner chamber and down a corridor of rough, cold stone. My breath misted the air as we

reached an arcing stair, beginning our long and terrible descent down, down to pandemonium, to the uttermost depths of hell.

Did the Emperor yet live, I wondered? Had Cynon been destroyed? Was Lorian still fighting? And Lin?

Was Cassandra still alive?

It was a long way down, by many lifts and many winding passages. The Minoan sorcerers had been hard at work, I saw, recognizing the stamp of their labors in the conveyance that carried us into the depths of Dharan-Tun, following tunnels that had not been there when last I'd visited that wretched place. More than once I heard the distant sound of screaming, or of tortured machines wailing in the night.

The city and palace of the Dhar-Iagon lay far below the surface, where the worldship—kept warm by the pull of gravity from the various worlds it came to circle in the long and terrible aeons of its voyaging—was warm enough to make life in its dark catacombs possible, if unbearable.

A noxious fume struck me as we emerged into the hellish light of the black city. Hushansa spurred me onward, one husk bracketing me at either side, while the third went on ahead of me—sword-crowned, proud as any queen. The creature's bodies were only puppets, taller, thinner than Cielcin-kind, each a golem animated by the general's distant will. What remained of the Prophet's former concubine—little more than its brain and spinal column—lay in an egg of Extrasolarian steel somewhere in the palace before me.

I could see the gates from the moment we exited the final lift, rising black and terrible above the earthen mounds and stone terraces that formed the bulk of the city itself. There was the parapet whence I once had hung in torment, just above the open door. With a pang, I realized that I had watched the construction of the very lift by which we'd entered the city while I hung there, dying of thirst. Sharply then I recalled the gangs of desperate laborers, worked to death and madness to build the lift tower on the strand above that boiling river of fire. How many men had I seen hurl themselves into that magma while I hung above them, unable to do so myself?

Greater than the deeps of Vorgossos was all that unholy place: a warren of caverns wet with weeping stone. How many of the Pale dwelt therein no man can say.

It must have been millions.

Surely millions roared to greet me then. They lined every terrace, stood on every mound, clung to walls and to the buttresses that upheld the roof of that cavernous space.

I saw their horned heads, their trailing braids, the faces painted or ritually scarred. Some carried weapons, clutched scimitars or stolen lances, or clung to banner staves whence hung the emblem of the White Hand. Of black was their raiment, or white, or azure, with here and there a cloak of celadon, of cerulean, of indigo or ultraviolet seeming gray to my eyes—each of silk or samite or the *irinyr* of their kind. Here were no mere soldiers, I knew, but the scions of the Prophet's court, its kith and kindred. On every head shone bands of gold, and golden rings adorned their horns and naked arms, so that every one of them seemed a king to me, an *aeta* in bearing, if not in fact—the dukes and counts, marquises and margraves, kings and presidents and princes of hell.

And seeing red among their vestments, knew—before Hushansa tipped its poison in my either ear—that here were the spoils of Forum, the wealth of Empire taken and poured out by its conqueror. Dorayaica had succeeded where Calen Harendotes had but pretended: It had made everyone a king.

“*Wemayu!*” they cried with one voice. “*Wemayu! Wemayu!*”

“Death to the Liar!”

“Death the King of Men!”

“Death to the Great Enemy! To the servant of Him!”

“Make terror in her heart!”

But I was not afraid, and permitted myself to be led from the platform, past ranked guards and along the narrow bridge that ran over the river of fire to that city where devils dwelt.

Step—step—step—step.

The Pale dwelt in hollow places, in tunnels and warrens carved in terraces before those mighty gates, or in lesser caverns beyond the confines

of that central space. I saw their doors like leering jaws, like the empty sockets of so many piled skulls. They peered down at me from all sides, and from the pillars and shoulders of rock that formed the heart of the Prophet's capital, buttressed by great workings of crude metal. Buildings there were too—the works of human hands, I did not doubt—that rose above the mounded terraces like bones from a rotting carcass, towers and domes of steel. In them dwelt the chiefest of the Prophet's thralls, those with thralls themselves, in palaces wrought in mockery of the palaces of men.

Foot—foot—foot—foot.

Hushansa never broke its strides, its three bodies marched in perfect synchrony. “You see?” said the one at my left. “You will die here.”

“You were a fool to come,” said the devil on my right. “But all was ordained.”

And the demon on my left said again: “You will die here.”

“Perhaps,” I said, not turning to look to either side. “But you will *all* die here.”

Hushansa's many hands all tightened on my arms. “It is blasphemy to lie,” said left and right together.

“On this,” I said to the tripartite demon, “we are agreed.”

I felt those hands like knives all tighten without effect.

Step—step—step—step.

I had to hurry—three paces to a stride—to stop myself from being dragged, but I did not falter. And though my pace was constant, my heart was troubled.

Dorayaica was expecting me, *had been* expecting me.

All this—the march, the murder of its guards in the airlock—had been arranged for my benefit, just as it had arranged the attack on Forum, the destruction of Gododdin, the initial warp-wake strike on our fleet.

It was a triumph.

It was *Dorayaica's* triumph.

For the first time since I left Cassandra on the shuttle, my certainty cracked, and I knew a moment of fear.

Dorayaica was expecting me.

Foot—foot—foot—foot.

The gates were approached by a long, straight stair that rose through a cutting in the terraced rock, rising past level after level like the stands of an amphitheater where the inhuman throng stood gathered. I spied one that might have been a child standing at the fore, its head crowned with many crowns, gnawing a man's severed arm. Red blood ran down its chin, and it did not stop its eating as we drew nearer. Others had red mouths, red hands, faces smeared where they had tried—without success—to wipe the gore away.

There were men stood among them, I saw, their heads shaved, faces slashed, ears and lips removed. Others stood with blind sockets staring, heads tilted, listening, quivering. There were women, too, their torments just as vile. In them I saw the echo of Prince Aranata's slave, her mutilated hands flexing powerlessly, forever unable to grasp.

But there was one—a boy, I think he was—that stood by some miracle at the fore, his face oddly clean, his eyes shining. They were of different colors. One was earthy brown.

The other was green.

Seeing him, I stumbled at last. Hushansa did not, and so I was dragged up several smooth, broad steps, my feet both striking stone. The boy did not recoil as I passed, but looked on with stone-faced solemnity, a sorrow deeper than his years.

Staggering, I found my feet, and the dread I had felt vanished.

I was not alone.

Step—step—step—step.

I reached the top of the stair, stood almost directly beneath the place where I had hung in torment. Beyond the gate lay the bridge that crossed the lake of fire, and beyond that the tunnel. A boiling wind greeted us, rising from the magma lake. I tasted sulfur. Carbon. Bitter alkalis.

We crossed the lake of fire, leaving the crowd behind. The gates of the Dhar-Iagon were shut behind us with a noise like the ending of the world. All the while the shadow moved with us, hanging over everything like a shroud.

Atta eperum.

Eza ti-jajaya belnii.

Atta lā mimma.

Ejaan! Ejaan!

You are nothing, kinsman.

Syriani's voice whispered in my ear. Its hand was on my shoulder, its touch light as shadow.

Your kind were animals when we were kings.

Anamono ji yukajjimn ti-gau.

it said.

. . . zirom ca apha capimat im lonchon irasad madriax!

That last was Miudanar, speaking alone.

"You are nothing now," I said, addressing the beast. "Shape without form."

Zir ol?

Sha anāku?

Eka ne?

"Am I?" it asked. I could almost see Dorayaica's face.

Hushansa hesitated at the sound of its master's voice, and we halted.

Ekanyi.

Ge im.

We are.

His brethren loomed to either side: foul Iaqram, with its many mouths; and heartless Nazhtenah. There were Pthamaru and Shamazha, and Usathlam—shapeless and accursed. More gods there were thereafter, titans of graven stone, images wrought by inhuman hands. There were the Watchers, marked out in all their loathsome splendor, their glory dimmed by their disease.

They had each had other names, I realized. Names older and deeper than Time.

The shadow went before us, and as it did, I felt . . . I felt . . .

I turned my head in horror, understanding kindling like a fire in my

breast.

Tabahan, oecrimi ams bransga taniis . . .
. . . oecrimi ams niis . . .

. . . ams zacamis . . .
. . . ams geniis od arpis.

Atta Bēlum Erishtim.
Atta Sharrum Shuttatim.

Dō Aeta ba-Aetane ba-Cielcin wo!

Who
comes . . .
Prince of Princes . . .

O

Tabahan ca tol Tabahan!

. . . netek wenek hem nechūen.

Petra pū yatay her hetepet?

. . . to the sacrifice?

. . . to the wedding feast?

Nimahhasshu?

Taba im! Taba im!
Shall we kill him?

Nilammadshu?

Aha sū!

Rech sū!

Taba im! Taba im!
Ana eperim shanam
nadānamshu?
have him.

Then let her

The Watchers had come. Those dark gods beyond eternity were there, resident in the idols. I felt their writhing shapes, shadows cast from otherworld, and recoiled. As we passed, I felt them bow their unseen heads, lesser shadows bending to the *one great*.

To Syriani-Miudanar. To the Princes of Princes, the Prophet, the King.
Or to me?

The thought was like a fever burning, like poison, like pain.

Was that thought my own? Or was it put in me by the things that dwelt

there in the stone to either side? My mind went back to the boy with the one green eye.

I am not alone. I locked eyes with the icon of Iaqaram.

I felt the beast recoil, felt the shadow grow then ever less, until the hall in which I stood was only a hall, no more a passage through true night.

Utannash has come.

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CHAPTER 74

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SUN

HERE AND THERE RED lanterns burned, like the scattered embers of some long-extinguished fire. What I saw I saw by the light of Hushansa's own eyes: the cyclopean stonework, the deep-delved halls, the winding corridors, more like the palace of some insect than the abode of an emperor. I recalled but little of it, having but rarely been permitted to leave the confines of my cell.

But I remembered the throne room.

The crude doors were long in opening, moving slow on mechanisms ancient and unfathomably vast. The room was vaster still, huge and hideous beyond the dreams of men. High pillars rose at seeming random to either side, their surfaces knobbed and whorled like bits of bone, and pilasters like the ribs of some sea beast holding up the stone sky.

Before us, a host of the Pale were kneeling, rank after rank of courtiers crowned and clad in gold, some kneeling, others prostrate.

No sound was there, nor breath, nor motion.

Nothing moved.

Every minister and secretary, every soldier, every priest . . .

. . . every one of them was dead.

Hushansa seemed not to notice them. The head of more than one had fallen away, and the place stank of dust, not decay. I longed to ask what had happened, but I thought I could guess: The Prophet had ordered its men to kneel, and not withdrawn that order.

The foremost of these knelt before the chasm that separated the court from the throne. There was no dais, no stair, no baldachin. The throne itself sat concealed from the masses by a dome of white stone—like an egg half buried in the floor—and accessed only by a single, narrow door.

Only one bridge linked the lower court to the space before the throne: a finger of black stone barely wide enough for a man to cross foot over foot.

The shadow was waiting.

Hushansa went before me, carrying my helm and sword.

The others released my arms. “Cross.”

I turned, looked at the bridge. It was perhaps half a hundred cubits long, and no wider than my outstretched hand.

I took the first step, and felt a wind from hell beneath me lift my hair. Hushansa stood at either end of that spar of black stone. The dome that concealed the Prophet’s throne seemed to gleam, as did the sea of white-robed, white-fleshed corpses we had left behind.

At last I reached the other side.

The door in the face of the dome was open, stood rolled to one side.

I could see nothing but darkness within.

Hushansa had ceased to move, stood fast, its face averted. Its other selves had not crossed the bridge, stood still as statues.

“Come to me,” came the apocalyptic voice, attended by ceaseless whispers in countless tongues. “Step out of the light.”

I did not refuse, stepped forward into the egg. Darkness swallowed me whole.

I could see nothing. There *was* nothing.

Nothing at all. Only the deep dark that was before all things—formless and void. I felt a shiver, felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand tall, electric.

Fear is death to reason, Gibson murmured in my ear, but I staved him off.

I did not need his words.

I am not alone.

He cannot help you.

Tia ipamis solpa am.

Ul izzibka.

Miudanar’s words filled the void. The beast saw my mind, I knew, but even that knowledge brought no fear, and I stood before them—hands yet

chained behind my back—tall and unafraid, as a king of men in the morning of the world.

In the hour before dawn.

“It is good of you to come, *kinsman*.” Dorayaica’s words were like the crinkling of old parchment.

The faint, red light of the throne room at my back—which must surely seem palest gray to Cielcin eyes—came through the door behind me in twin wedges, carving left and right, missing the throne in the center, so that there the darkness was deepest.

“You cannot know how long it is I have awaited this hour.” The stone dome gathered the creature’s words, so that they rebounded, seemed to issue from every way at once. “But I am glad, that of all the things in this world—all your damned god’s children—it is you who is here.”

I could feel the eyes of the Pale King on me—and the eye of its god.

Temmidniāshim.

You will join with us.

Ahātami tahasshad.

Join with her . . .

“You alone can understand my purpose,” it said. Were those its teeth, flickering in the dark? So many blades of glass? “You have approached the *truth*, come nearer than any of your kind. And though you lack *insight*, what I say will ring in your ears more true than in any other’s . . .” Its voice faltered, and I heard a wheezing, grinding sound, then the voice of the Pale King whispering. “*Radhassa, tussete ioman . . .*”

More blood.

I heard the shuffling of many limbs, the rattling of chains, the clink of rings. I guessed a goblet was pressed into Dorayaica’s hand by one in bondage.

“This is the end, kinsman,” Dorayaica said. “Know you that it is so. That is why you have come, is it not? To offer yourself in exchange for the lives of your pitiful race?”

I did not speak.

“Your power is broken,” it said, stirring in the dark. “Your fleet all but

destroyed. I have taken your holy city, burned the palace of your kings, taken his children for my own.” The Prophet’s voice rose in intensity, high and cold and terrible. “You thought to destroy us at Danu with your . . . fell weapons. You but showed me the way.” I thought I saw once more the glimmer of fangs. “It was your attack that inspired my attack upon your fleet. Faster than light! Than thought! This is *our* victory, kinsman. Yours and mine.”

All was as I’d suspected: The Cielcin had derived their strategy from my attack at Danu.

“We have done *together* what I failed to do alone.” The Prophet shifted, moving with a noise like the grinding of stone.

My eyes were adjusting to the gloom, little by little, and the faint glow of the indicators on my armor cast some small light. I was beginning to see the shape before me, that huddled mass of flesh and stone. Fine chains and antique bangles tinkled as it moved, glinting on its horned brow. Still the face was lost to shadow, though the arm Cassandra had taken—and Miudanar restored—shone with a deep, distant glow.

“We have destroyed your people, you and I,” said Syriani Dorayaica. “Their fire is finished. What remains is only to stamp out the embers.”

“Is that all?” I asked, speaking for the first time, my chin raised in human defiance—in Cielcin defeat. “There was I time—I recall—when it was the destruction of *all* that you sought. Are you now content to rule over ashes?”

I could just make out the Prophet’s crumbling head: its broken horns banded with silver and sapphire; its trailing braids. One eye met mine.

“I see I was mistaken,” it said, and turned that eye away, concealing the ruin of its face. “You understand nothing.” The left hand—the hand of flesh—flung its drinking horn on the pale stone floor. It was nearly empty, but still left its mark. In the thin light, I could not tell if the blood the Prophet drank was red or black.

“You cannot destroy what is,” I said, drawing to one side. “I warned you. On Danu. You can only make it darker. But you cannot make it dark.”

As I spoke, a shape moved on the worn stone floor, scrabbling to

retrieve the fallen horn. Seeing it, I froze, looked down on it in wonder.

I had never seen its like before.

The beast—if beast it was—crawled on several furry limbs. Six there were in all, hands and feet together—or eight. With three of these, it gathered Dorayaica’s drinking horn to its breast. As it did, it raised its face to mine. That face! How shall I describe it? It was furred white and scarlet, and seeming featureless but for the eyes. Black they were, and each huge as my whole face. These were not set forward, but to either side of the creature’s huge, shaggy head, that it might see all round without turning. Each was faceted like a jewel, like onyx intricately carved, as though it were some species of mighty insect. Above these were set long, drooping ears like the ears of a rabbit, two cubits long at least. Its limbs were thin as the arms of children, with hands like hooked claws that seemed wrought of naked bone, while about its shoulders and narrow trunk a thick coat of fur clung like a shawl, chalk white and violent red. Almost a great moth it seemed to me, but wingless, and there was something in its gaze . . . a solemnity, a sense of peace, that wounded me so deeply as the gaze of the green-eyed boy. I could sense the wisdom in that gaze, its pain and mingled dignity.

And I knew that here was one of that *other* race, whom the Cielcin called *Hakurani*, though what they called themselves I never learned.

It bowed its head to me and turned aside, clutching the bloody horn to its furred breast. In doing so, I saw the chain bound to the collar about its throat, and recognized in that collar the mark of Minoan handicraft. I wondered to see it there—still alive—when the whole of the court outside was dead.

The dark will endure.

. . . trian padox.

The dark is all that will endure.

A ors i tol ar trian padox.

“You are made of light, yourself!”

“Where is your ship?” Dorayaica asked. “The one fashioned by your machines.”

I took my eyes from the Hakurani only reluctantly, struck by the deep sadness in its inhuman eyes, by its beauty, its dignity—even in chains.

“How is it concealed?”

“You’re afraid,” I said. “Your sorcerers could give you no answers. Nor your gods.” I stood a little straighter. “You’re beginning to doubt, aren’t you? Your *truth*?”

The shadow on the throne grew darker, and the light that veined its shattered face and severed arm shone a little brighter—but remote.

Pi trian blan am.

She will have you.

. . . zacam am.

She will make you her own.

“Your weapons can do nothing!” the Prophet said. “*She* is among your people, destroying your ships, turning the minds of your slaves against one another. Your fight is in vain. Now, tell me: Where is your ship?”

The darkness grew darker still, a thing almost tangible. I felt . . . cold, as though the very fire in my veins were stolen away. It was the Watcher, I knew, Miudanar’s manifest will crouching over me, towering like a giant in the dark, its bulk far greater than the chamber of the throne could contain.

“Kill me if you like,” I said. “I am only a messenger.”

I felt the shadow slacken, felt warmth drain back into my limbs.

Ālikum?

Atta lillum.

You are a fool.

Tuka qisabar . . .

Tia balan am. Tia badalan am.

He uses you.

Tia balon pala im.

Has used us both . . .

“He *made* this world,” Dorayaica said. “Do you not see? He made *all of it*.” The Prophet raised its hand, the black hand—once white. A finger like the crooked shadows between galaxies found my face. “You. Me. All of it.” There were cracks in the Prophet’s flesh. Like old stone. “He made us what we are, and condemns us for his failings. He is *evil*, Hadrian.” Had the

Prophet ever said my name before? “We are only what we are. What *he* made us.”

The Hakurani slave—Dorayaica had called her Radhassa—looked on in silence, still clutching its master’s cup.

“You think yourself a slave,” I said to the Prince of Princes.

“We are all his slaves,” said Syriani Dorayaica. “But I will not remain one. I will become a god.”

“Your gods are *not* gods!” I hurled my words in its face. “They are *his* creatures, as surely as you and I.”

The darkness closed again, so deep that for a moment I lost sight of the Prophet’s broken face, saw only its jaw, its teeth like shattered glass, its chin wet where the blood from its goblet ran. The Prophet’s words slid snakelike into my brain.

Uja rakanyi safig’gyr.

it said.

But they are free.

My eyes went once more to the Hakurani, standing there, unmoved.

I understood at last.

Dorayaica was a *seeker*. Like Kharn Sagara. Like Here Soonchanged. Only it had found its answer, an answer to that last, ultimate question.

It had found a way out.

The Watchers were formless. Shapeless. Without matter or substance. They alone of all creation might leave creation. They alone might escape our universe, and see what lay beyond.

“Iazyr Kulah,” I said, voice hushed.

“It exists,” Dorayaica said. “A world without *him*. A world apart . . .” The black hand and the white both curled into fists. The white hand splintered. “I will go there, when I have burned this world to foam. I will go there, and build a new creation.” Blood ran from its shattered face like tears. “A world your god will never touch.”

I shuddered to think what a universe wrought by such a one must become.

“Think you that I am a monster,” said Syriani Dorayaica, its eye of flesh

on me. “How much more monstrous then, must my maker be?”

“You’re wrong,” I said, and recalled that rocking cradle. The voice. The love vast as the space between galaxies.

If you need my life, Child, take it, he had said to me, and had not resisted. *It is yours.*

“I will not be his slave!” the Prophet said.

“What of your people?” I asked, then stood before the throne. “What of the Cielcin?”

“The Cielcin!” The smile that broke the Prophet’s face was like the smile of Ushara, but wider, blacker, more terrible still. “They are dust, as are you! They are nothing. They will die, and you will die—but not before you understand: It is not *me* that does this thing. Not Dorayaica. Not even my god. It is *yours*. It is *him*, and him alone. He could stop this, but he won’t . . .”

You are alone.

Miudanar’s whispers slithered along the smooth stone walls.

Am ti elsha.

Elsha. Elsha.

Unassa.

Alone.

“He has sent you here to die,” said the Prophet. “To me.”

To us.

Ana mahrini.

De im.

“And he has used you,” it said, and raised its black hand. The shadow settled on the room again, crouched upon the throne, drowning the red light from outside and the pale translucence of the stone itself. The Hakurani stood unmoving, and for a moment seemed to glow. Then it was gone, and the Prophet was gone, and there was nothing.

Nothing . . . for a just a moment.

Then there was light. Countless stars lay at my feet, and before me, and above my head.

I was standing, unmasked, in the vacuum of space. The Prophet had vanished, and its slave along with it, and the unhewn throne. Light fountained in the deep, blast after blast, and turning I saw the wreck of a vessel drifting slowly past. It was an Imperial battleship, a black blade—gold edged—with no handle. The blast of some dreadful weapon had blown the thing wide open, so that a constellation of shrapnel spun from her wounded side.

A body floated past me, near at hand. It was a woman. She floated inverted, wore no suit, no helmet, only an officer's dress blacks. Her long coat hung stiffly in vacuum, as if held out on twigs, and her arms were like broken wings.

Then she was gone, floated past me, vanished in the night.

She was not alone.

There were others. Countless others, each carried on a current all its own, falling through that bright darkness. Thousands of them, like fish dead upon a poisoned tide.

See what your devotion has bought you, kinsman?

Ma'a'ek? Ma'a'ek?

Gnae am uran?

Oleu ne?

You did this.

It was you.

Am. Crid am.

You made this happen.

"He made this happen." The Prophet's voice was in my ear, at my back. "He does not care how many of your kind will die . . ."

. . . so long as his will is satisfied.

Miudanar's voice darkened the very stars.

"He is content to pit his slaves against one another—as in the arena," Dorayaica said. "This he calls *justice*."

No.

I shut my eyes, felt the dark recoil as I answered it, speaking as *they* spoke: mind touching mind.

When I opened them, the vision was gone. In its place there was only the throne room. The Prophet. Its slave.

“No,” I said again. “I don’t believe that.”

“This world . . .” Dorayaica said, chest rising with every shallow breath. “This world will end, and I—”

We.

Im.

Seneti inek . . .

“—we shall build a better one without *him*.”

“You’re mistaken,” I said. Approaching the throne, I peered into the Prophet’s ruined face. “You’re dying.”

There was no step. No dais. No boundary between the Prophet and myself. Standing, I was nearly so tall as it was seated. I studied what it had become, took in the crumbling flesh, the skin flaking like plaster . . . the silvered dark beneath.

“It is *you* who is dying,” Dorayaica said. “This world . . . everything. I alone will remain. I will join them, kinsman. I will . . . become a god.”

“No,” I said, “your god is killing you.”

“Enough!” the Prophet screamed, and reached out with the black hand of its god. I felt the fingers close about my throat, felt the hand lift me bodily from the floor. I struck the dome with enough force to knock the breath from me. The Prophet had not left its chair, and its eyes—all three of them—were fixed on me. “You were supposed to understand,” it said. “You have seen it. You *know* what this world is. That it is false. That it was not meant to be this way! And still, still you fight for it?”

I was alone, defenseless, trapped in a room with a god and the creature it had destroyed.

“You might have joined me!” it said. “Taken *her* to yourself. We might have left this world together, escaped this *prison*!” The arm that held me fast trembled, its sinews—if sinews they could be called—growing wider as it shook. “But you are *nothing*! Dust! Clay! Like the rest of them! To be trodden beneath our feet!” It pushed me higher, higher along the wall, until I was halfway between the floor and the apex of the dome.

Then Syriani Dorayaica arose, and all its crumbling majesty with it. Tall it was—black robed, black armored, crowned with ivory and electrum—but its eyes were wild, and shone as if with fever, its cracked face weeping blood. “Told you, did I not? That *he* would be silent in your hour of need?” The fingers of its hand—of its god’s hand—tightened about my throat. “Where is he? Your god? Where is Utannash, Greatest of Deceivers?” It bared its fangs. “He has deceived *you*. He brought you here to die, as he brought all your wretched kind. *This* is what he wants from you: Your *compliance*! Your *sacrifice*! Your blind *faith*!”

Was it right, I wondered—about that much at least?

I knew the answer.

He wanted no less than he had given—and he had given all.

If I was to die, so be it. *Astrophage* would still fire. I shut my eyes—or thought I did—the world was going dark . . . and the last thing I would ever see in this broken world would be *their* face. The face of Syriani-Miudanar: broken, bleeding, crumbling to dust, its teeth bared, its chin wet with human blood, its eyes wide with fever and fury and hatred. Of mankind. Of its kind. Of all kinds.

And of itself.

Darkness.

Darkness.

Darkness.

But in that darkness—a pale light moved, a thing untouched.

I heard—as from very far away—a cry! A crack! A noise like stone striking stone!

The hand that crushed my throat was gone, and I was falling. Falling through clear air. My knees struck stone, and in that moment I thanked the Absolute for the new flesh it had given me, remembering the old pain in my limbs. I fell upon my face, gasping like a fish upon the strand.

Is it strange to say I felt no fear?

My hands still were bound, my chest heaving, my body shaking—but my spirit was unbent. My vision swam, faint light returning. Almost I

thought that I was lying on the floor of Uvanari's cell, of the cubiculum where I had first awoken on Dharan-Tun.

Dharan-Tun.

I was on Dharan-Tun, before the Prince of Princes. The Prophet-King.

The Bride of Miudanar. Last Lord of All Cielcin.

But its throne was empty.

Where had the Prophet gone?

Hands seized me, many hands of jointed bone.

Hushansa! I panicked, rose snarling, whirled.

It was the Hakurani. The slave-thing, white furred and red furred, long eared and many-handed. It looked at me with those monstrous, compound eyes, black gems each the size of my face.

You must go, it said, and I felt the words rather than heard them, as a reverberation in my chest.

I looked on the beast in wonderment, still gasping for air. "Ho—how?"

That does not matter now! The very air vibrated about the beast as it spoke. *Go!*

I cast my eyes about the room, saw the black mass huddled at the base of the throne. It had fallen on its face, its black cloak and blue-fringed toga over it. I saw its tangled hair, its braids like heavy ropes banded with silver, hung with jewels. Shards of white stone lay upon the floor, as though a marble bust had smashed upon the floor.

The Prophet's head was shattered. The snarling horns lay in pieces. The cranium and top of the head were gone.

"You . . ." I looked at the slave in wonder, unable to find my words. It was impossible. It wasn't possible. Syriani Dorayaica . . . the Prophet-King, the Bride of Miudanar—and its slave—was not, could not be . . .

". . . dead?"

No. The air vibrated with the inhuman answer, so that the word seemed to come from within myself. *Go! Now!*

"What?" I could not stop looking at the Prophet's broken head. There was no blood. No brain matter. There was nothing inside it. Nothing at all.

You must go!

I felt the creature's clawlike hands on me, clinging to my arm.

But I was transfixed, spell-caught, enchanted. I could not look away. By the faint light from outside I saw the murder weapon, lying on the stone beside the Great One's corpse. It was the drinking horn. That banded flute of ivory and silver. It had been cut from a Cielcin—of that I was certain, and delicately carved, etched with runes. Not the rounded glyphs of Cielcin calligraphy, which they had inherited from the Watchers—who had taken the letters in turn from him as made them, to whom they were not letters at all—but an ancient, crawling script. I wondered at its age, and guessed that here was a thing brought from the Cielcin homeworld, from Se Vattayu, long lost. A piece of the treasure horde of Elu, long scattered, the memory of the race that was before that first of all kings.

A memory of their kind *before* Cielcin, before the Watchers' taint.

Radhassa had smashed the Prophet's head with it, broken it open like a gourd.

"You killed it."

The slave was slender as a willow wand, and naked but for its coat of snow and carmine fur. Its six arms hung free at its sides, each tipped with hands like pincers. Despite its strangeness—its haunting face, seeming part insect to me and part cat, its light but droning voice, and the fact it spoke our words—there was a beauty to it, a nobility I but little understood. Here was no slave, but a queen.

"You killed it . . ." I said again.

Radhassa hummed again, but the word that filled my breast came not from her.

No.

Inu . . .

Appha!

Veih! Veih!

Lā! Lā! Lā!

In-gi!

Im tel ipamis!

Im tedol

ge!

No!

Im noqododra

ge!

No!

No!

Once, in my long exile upon Colchis, when I walked the shores of Thessa with Valka, with Gibson, or alone, I had happened upon a shell. A terranic conch long abandoned by its maker. Finding it beautiful, I had turned it with my foot, and so startled the octopode that had taken up residence within the jeweled husk. Sensing danger, the beast extricated itself in sections, emerging first one tentacle, then the next, and the next, revealing itself a thing many times larger than its container. It made for the surf, spraying its darkness on clear water as it slid into the sea.

Thus it was in that moment, as *something* slithered from the Prophet's corpse. A questing serpent. Then another. And another.

The fingers of a hand.

The hand itself followed, followed by the arm.

Radhassa seized my arm. *Go! Now!*

The very air about the corpse distended, space itself groaning, stretching with the fever-pangs of birth. The lights on my suit went dead, and the lights in the chamber sparked and died, and outside the throne I heard a crash.

The Hakurani seized me with every hand she had. *Go!*

"Come with me!" I said, and tried to drag her by her own firm grip.

The xenobite's face might have been a mask. It did not move, made no expression. One hand seized her bonds, rattled them.

I had forgotten her chains.

Groaning, I went toward the door, and reaching it, understood the crash that I had heard. Hushansa and Hushansa and Hushansa lay dead, all three of its corpses slain by the same pulse that had killed my suit.

My sword! It was there, lying beside the nearest corpse. I left the throne chamber behind, dropped to my knees, and—scrabbling behind my back—seized my Phaian weapon.

Do not tarry! Radhassa stood in the door. *Go! Go!*

Failing, I stood, kicked the hilt toward the servant. "Take it!" I said. "Cut us loose!"

A roaring filled that high, dark place, a noise great and terrible beyond description, so that all of Dharan-Tun shook with its black music. My blade fountained in the night, and a moment later, Radhassa was free, staggering on her two-clawed feet.

She cut my bonds, and as I took my sword another cry went up, a roaring dark and terrible as the storm! But it came not from within the dome, issued instead from the open portal behind it and to one side. That way—I guessed—lay the Prophet's own quarters.

Something was crawling toward us, out of that inner dark. Something *massive*, terrible, and sublime—a huge, shuddering mass.

"Get behind me," I said, placing myself between the inhuman slave and this new terror.

The lights on my suit were stirring, recovering from the pulse that had issued from the Watcher reborn. My helm lay on the ground by Hushansa's fallen shell. I snatched it up, placed it back onto my head.

She is coming, Radhassa intoned. *The other!*

I readied my blade. I had only to live long enough for Orphan to do its work.

The *thing* in the arched portal lurched toward us, crawling on its hands, dragging its hideous bulk behind it. Again it let forth its cry, and with a jolt emerged into the light.

My blade faltered.

Cielcin it was, and more than Cielcin. No machine. No trick of Minoan artistry. No monster wrought by man. Its head alone was large as I, its mouth wide enough to swallow me whole, a crawling titan—white faced, white haired, glass fanged, and pitiless. It must have weighed as much as a bull elephant. But it was the horns that most drew my attention.

They were short. So short one might have said they hardly existed at all. They reminded me of . . . something, but the terror of it banished all thought from my mind.

Seeing me standing there, it slavered, let out another roar. A cry. A cry!

Understanding came like a shot, like a bolt of thunder. I knew why the creature's horns had seemed familiar—where I had seen their like.

Darathama.

It was a child, I realized—and the thought was acid in my veins.

A babe.

Dorayaica's child.

Go, Taxiarch! Go! Radhassa shouted. She shoved me toward the abyss, toward the narrow way, and the sea of corpses on the other side. The creature was strong, far stronger than those slender limbs should allow, and I was moved despite myself. *Your road lies before you!*

The inhuman voice resonated in my chest in an act of infrasonic ventriloquism. My whole body shook.

The titanic infant roared, whined, clawed its way over the uneven stone.

The way is straight! She said, turning her back on me. *But the door is narrow! If you will not go, you will fail, and all will be for nothing. Go!*

Her words spurred me to action, and I staggered back then several paces, retreating toward the bridge, the dead court.

Go!

I hesitated, just a moment, wavering.

The giant babe came on, dragging itself hand over hand.

Radhassa's face was turned to me, her black eyes shining in the dark. That was the last I saw the creature: standing tall, erect, shining in the darkness. She did not run, but turned and faced the giant. One hand—huge as Radhassa herself—closed about the white xenobite.

Blood clear as water ran between those massive fingers.

Obedient to her dying wish, I turned and fled. I made the bridge in three strides, and when I had nigh crossed, I looked back. The giant halted, hands gripping the abyss to either side of that lonely spar of chiseled stone.

Sword in hand, I faced Radhassa's destroyer, halfling spawn of the Prophet and its god.

The Hakurani had bought me my life. But why?

The way is straight, but the door is narrow. Her words still hummed in my chest.

If you will not go, you will fail, and all will be for nothing.

She had known.

About me. About my purpose. About the Watchers . . .
About all of it.

I knew what hand had placed her in that throne room, had placed the horn into her hands.

He is content to pit his slaves against one another—as in the arena . . .
The Prophet's words sat darkly my heart. Radhassa had had her part to play—one part among millions. Another pawn for sacrifice. Another piece on the board.

But she had played her part, and played it well.

Could I do less then?

The giant lunged.

I swung my sword and cut that tongue of black stone, just as I had done against Kedron's Sentinels in the fight for the heart of *Demiurge*.

The bridge broke and tumbled into the abyss, carrying the Prophet's vile spawn down with it. It fell screaming into the night.

I stood alone a moment, there, on the edge.

Dorayaica was dead. Slain. And not by my hand.

What was I to do? The Hakurani had urged me to run, but where should I go? Dharan-Tun was a den of vipers, and I was alone in its heart.

I turned to go at last, and found *her* waiting for me, standing amidst the corpses at my back. Tall she was, and beautiful, her long black hair a gauzy shade. She took no step, but slid toward me, space slithering as she moved, the bodies of the dead courtiers breaking about her feet.

Ushara! Ushara! Ushara had come.

Like fire her eyes, twin rings of fire around night.

There was no escape, no retreat possible.

My feet faltered; my blade drooped.

"Kinsman!" The word issued from the far side of the chasm at my back, echoed off the gnarled pillars and twisted vaults.

I knew that voice, though it was not the voice of Dorayaica. Darkly polished it was, and smooth, and so familiar. Heedless of Ushara's coming then, I turned.

The egg had hatched, and in its place the shadow gleamed, and stood

upon the brink. But the shape it wore was that of a man. Pale as Ushara was he, naked and unashamed. All black his hair, long as a woman's. But it was his face that drew my eye and filled my blood with terror. Well I knew that pointed nose, those high cheekbones, those sharply canted brows.

Seeing them, I recognized the voice and understood.

The voice I'd heard was my own, though it issued from the monster's lips.

"Let us stop this!" he said. "You are beaten! Do you not see? It is ended! You were deceived! Here is the proof!" He spread his hands, and I saw on each six fingers. "I am remade!"

"Dorayaica?" The word dropped like a sword from numb fingers.

"He is not a god!" the creature said. "Think you that he would need you if he was? Think you he would send slaves to do his bidding? He needs you! But you do not need him."

My own voice buffeted me, words striking me like stones, and as I stood there, the whole of the chamber rocked—as if Dharan-Tun were a ship at anchor on some unsteady tide. The pillars seemed to bend and sway like trees in a summer wind as the very foam of space churned. "Take our sister!" he urged me, and his smile rose higher on one side. "We shall destroy him, you and I. We shall cast him down, and all this lying universe. We shall be gods together, Kinsman! We shall rule!"

It was my own voice that spoke the words. My own hand held out in token of peace.

I blinked, and at once it was Ushara who stood before me, her hand outstretched—not my shadow self.

Let us go then . . .

she said.

. . . you and I.

Her hair was shadow, and fluttered not in the wind—but in the light. Her skin was white as alabaster, as the shell of the Quiet's egg, and shone, so that her light dispelled her darkness. She stood upon the very air before me, her feet apart, while around us both a pale light arose. I saw gray figures,

the shapes and shadows of men and women—all unclad—moving on the walls. One by one they came, surrounding we three: Hadrian, and Hadrian, and Ushara. Some stood as she stood: upon the air. Others stood upon the floor, or stood buried to the knees in solid stone, while others stood upon the ceiling, or hung upside down in clear air, or upon some tangent.

I recalled the monsters I had seen with Dorayaica in the Dark.

Other devils . . .

The Watchers had come, refulgent.

Silent witnesses, as at a coronation . . .

. . . or a wedding feast.

I stood transfixed, visions pouring through my head. My hand moved of itself, found the catchment that released my jeweled helm. It opened like a flower, as she opened to me. Bare faced then, I smiled. I smiled because there—at the end of everything—it was so, so easy to *refuse*.

“You have nothing to offer me but death,” I said, and slapped her hand away.

Her face broke, and the chamber broke about her, space itself cracking with the full weight of her rage. Her white teeth were like fangs, and the faces of every one of her kindred became each a window into nightmare. Her fury was like the lightning, her change so sudden, her speed so great no mere man could escape her wroth.

I was no mere man.

I took a single step. Toward her.

Forward.

Down.

I plunged into the abyss, and as I did, I threw out my hand, Edouard’s pocket telegraph tight in my fist, and gave Orphan the signal it had been waiting for all this time. The air about us shimmered, at once was filled with threads of purest light. And I was falling, falling, hurtling past walls of crude stone. I looked up, and time stretched about me. I saw the Watchers like giants peering down, not understanding their undoing—the doom I had brought down upon their house.

Ushara’s eyes met mine.

I smiled.

Pride.

A mistake.

Then time's dark water closed over my head, and I felt myself whisked away by its tide. I saw a flash across the surface of ordinary space—the report of *Voidmaker*.

Then the current took me, and bore me far away.

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CHAPTER 75

VOIDMAKER

I WAS ADRIFT IN darkness, in the waters beyond time. My leap had carried me far, far from Dharan-Tun, far from Gododdin, far from all that I had ever known. I cannot say how long I floated thus, or had floated, for there time had no meaning, and every seeming instant was as eternity.

But I knew that I had slain them.

I still held the transmitter in my hand.

I held it tightly, as though it were a talisman, an anchor, a cord that bound me to the mortal world. The instrument of victory.

I had slain the Watchers. Brought *Voidmaker* down upon them. Carved the heart from Dharan-Tun . . .

. . . and escaped.

I sank deeper, deeper, down into that darkling sea. I smiled, knowing that I would soon see Valka again.

I saw something else instead.

When first I'd fallen into that howling Dark—after Aranata slew me in the garden—I'd had this sense there were other shapes in the darkness, as though I were a plankton disturbed by the passage of a whale.

What I saw then must have been just a whale. An inhabitant of the night, a creature like the Watchers, and yet unlike. A thing for which we men had no words and less conception. I discerned the passage of fins—perhaps they were wings: the wings of a peacock, or a butterfly. I saw spots like eyes; heard a faint, far-off music.

I was alone.

Ten thousand years.

Ten seconds.

The same.

Then something stranger still emerged from the darkness, made visible by the coruscating light of my distant universe. A wind came with it, as off warm waters.

It was a ship, if unlike any I had known. Thin as a reed, with trailing sails of gold foil reaching out like the arms of a cross, and numerous white geodesics like the eggs of some folded paper spider.

And it was broken, its rigging floating past.

I caught a line with my free hand—not knowing why, or how that queer vessel had found its way to that abyss beyond world's end. But it was of human make. It bore me through darkness, careering ever downward. Its foiled sails each caught the light of the distant cosmos, gleaming like fire. Placing Edouard's transmitter back in its place at my belt, I hauled myself on down the rigging, until at last I grasped a handle on the outer hull, no thought for what I intended, or where I was going. I only wanted to cling to that shattered vessel as a drowning man to his bit of flotsam, and to rest.

There had to be a hatch. A way inside. A way out of the darkness, or into a darkness deeper still. I started to crawl, floating hand over hand along the hull. I felt as one fighting sleep, felt I made each motion five and fifty times. Grasping, grasping, grasping—always for the same handhold, always with the same motion.

Again. Again. Again. Again.

I found a hatch. A wheel lock. Found myself back along the hull, ten cubits from the door. Space was meaningless as time, and stretched, blurred as color in a dream. Then the very darkness rippled, as though it were the surface of some unseen sea, though it rose before my ship like the wall of a building. Beneath its surface *something* moved, another whale shape, indescribably vast.

Do . . .

. . . what . . .

. . . must . . .

. . . be.

“Ragama?”

Seek . . .

. . . seek . . .

. . . *hardship*.

A face vast as the face of a sun slid just beneath that darkness, and a hand—or a fin, a wing—broke the surface. The little ship I clung to was tossed across eternity, and though I tried to keep my grip, I was flung from the deck.

I landed in untrammelled snow, the world shining all about me. My body knew where I was before my mind worked it out. I gasped, clawing at my face, my throat. There was no air. No air! The face of the dead woman in Dorayaica's vision floated like the face of Ragama in my mind, and I scrabbled at my chest.

Lying on the snow, I turned my head, saw myself lying there beside myself, again and again. For a moment then, my life became an act of will, as it had been when I first descended the mountain on Annica. I mastered Fear and Panic—those sons of War—and keyed the command to don my helmet. The shell closed about my head, and a moment later I tasted clear, pure air. I spent a long moment then just lying there. Just *breathing*.

I was back, had been *sent* back. I had escaped the palace. The Prophet. The Watchers and the endless night . . .

. . . and from the fate I'd felt sure was mine.

From *Voidmaker*.

The outside world was silent. Even the war above made no sound.

I looked up into the night, hoping to spy the great vessel—any vessel—any sign of man's defiance against the Cielcin horde.

The Prophet was dead, its gods—perhaps—along with it.

But it would not matter. Man's day was ended, his power breaking, his sun going down in fire. Still the battle raged, though the only ships I saw were of Cielcin make—small moons against the sky. There was lightning on the surface of Ywain, and the magnetic fire of auroras.

I might be waiting a long time for my answer.

Where could I go? I was alone in an endless desert of white, hundreds of miles—perhaps—from the nearest entrance to the Cielcin underworld. I was safe, for the moment, but my suit's air would not last forever. I might

escape back into that endless ocean of night, but there was no guarantee I could return.

Swaying, I tapped my comm, spoke into the dim light of my helmet. “Orphan,” I said, words coming with great difficulty, as if my experience beyond the edge of infinity had robbed me of speech. “Orphan, is it done?” I did not know how long I would need to wait for the comm to lag, how far from me *Demiurge* then was.

I might have issued a distress call, triggered my emergency beacon, but I did not. The Cielcin might miss my coded transmission, but a general broadcast? Never.

And so I watched the wounded heavens, and staggered forward, awaiting an answer . . . or the end. *Astrophage* was in position, had lain in wait since the day we arrived, when I had used Eidyn’s destruction to distract from its deployment.

Another burst of light filled the sky over Dharan-Tun, and the shock of it annihilated all darkness. Somewhere in the night above, Lorian was fighting, striving alone against the Prophet’s fleet, while what remained of the Imperial armada struggled a hundred million miles away, against the world-enders that had come for Gododdin and Cynon alike.

Was Cynon lost already?

Did it matter? It would be destroyed soon.

I kept walking. There was nothing in all that world, nothing to relieve that flat expanse of ice. No rock was there, nor tree, nor tower of steel or stone.

I was alone at the end of the world.

Alone.

Was Cassandra all right?

Let her survive, at least, I prayed.

“Master?” The familiar basso sounded in my ear. “It is done!”

“We have you,” said the other. “We know where you are.”

It is done. I sagged where I stood. It had worked. *Voidmaker* . . . had killed them all. I checked my terminal, the time between my signal and

Orphan's. Fifty-two minutes had passed. *Demiurge* was twenty-six light-minutes away. So far.

"Dispatch a shuttle," I said. Most likely it already had, in which case the ship would arrive before my orders did. In a sense speaking to myself, then, I said, "The Prophet is dead."

It would be nearly an hour before I heard a reply, before which time I might deliver the message face-to-face.

By then, the battle would be very nearly over.

I halted.

This is the ending he desires . . .

So many dead, so much destroyed . . . so much suffering, and loss, and pain. It was the path that we had chosen—every living being, every one of us . . . human and Cielcin and machine. But could he truly not have saved us? Intervened?

I knew the answer, had accepted it long ago.

Why then did it cause such pain?

Deep cracks ran through the glacier, carmine where water met salt.

Time runs down.

The Prophet was dead . . . and it hardly even mattered.

Billions would still die, must die.

Grief twisted, turned to anger. I hunched over until my brow struck the ice.

I screamed, though there was no one there to hear it. I screamed until my voice went all to pieces and my air ran out.

They were dead. The others. All of them. Every one. It had not been enough to drive us into darkness, to *trap* us in the little box he had made. No. He'd sent his little pet, *his slave*—that lump of living clay—to *destroy* us. And he had. I had seen his exultation: the smile on his animal face as the killing light surrounded us. I had fled, and my brother had fled—but the others?

They were cut down in the very moment in which I should have entered him and taken him for my own.

I could destroy him. Would destroy him.

And I would make *him* watch.

I sat up, looked up into the heavens. I was not certain—not then certain—what I sought there. Ywain turned to face the sun above our heads. She was jewel green, with here and there striations of white and dun, like the egg of some enormous bird.

It was beautiful. All the things *he* made were beautiful.

Anger turned to something darker still, a black, chthonic fury.

Light erupted from on high, heralding the destruction of yet another ship. White light darkened, turned gold, then red. One Cielcin moon was burning, its molten core exposed.

Its light cast a shadow on the snow: a thing distinct, unmistakable.

I felt the smile coming, and—stopping it—smiled all by myself.

You will not have me, I thought, knowing she could hear. And looking up, I saw her standing on the air above me, her feet upon the firmament, her gauzy hair tossed by the light of burning worlds. So small she seemed in that moment: a fragile figure, infinitely remote.

She had survived.

I smoothed my smile away, for though it was not hers, it was—in a sense—of her.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I turned on the spot. She was there, every way I turned, her nude form refracted across the heavens, so that she encircled me.

I was surrounded.

My hand found Edouard's transmitter, and I thumbed the trigger, telegraphed a short message to Orphan. Three quick pulses. One long.

The signal to prime *Voidmaker* once again.

Could Ushara sense my intent? I thought not. Though she had tried to take my mind from me, I had denied her. Never again would she worm her way into my heart, or read my secret thoughts. Never again would I carry a piece of her in me. Never again would Cassandra suffer her hideous touch.

It did not matter if she killed me, there on the snows of Dharan-Tun.

I had already won.

Your brothers are dead, I said. *Your sisters.*

In her fury, she had revealed the truth to me.

Voidmaker had worked.

They *could* be killed.

My right hand found my sword, and a snap extension of my wrist called the weapon forth. That blade—bright as starlight—flowered in the dark and cold. I raised it then in mortal challenge, in defiance of her and all her vile kindred.

“Your day is done!” I roared. “Nothing but death remains!”

She let out a piercing cry—a fell music like the ringing of monstrous bells, so loud I felt certain Lorian could hear her light-minutes away. Great was she in majesty and in might, scion of that race older than time, her will encoded by the hand and word of the Absolute himself. She was *his* creation, a splendorously shining daughter of the one above all. She had witnessed the Cataclysm whose rupture marked the birth of all, and seen the first stars catch fire in the night.

What was I measured against a being of such enormity?

Only a man.

But we are their siblings. The same will that set her soul afire before time began conceived me, the same gifts he’d let drop from his hands were mine to take up, as I took up my father’s sword in that moment to disembowel the stars themselves, shouting my defiance!

“Your end has come!”

Her fury fell upon me like a thunderbolt, her will like star iron, and the very ice beneath my feet shattered, while the woman refracted in the sky did not stir, but stood in judgement over me.

That blow should have crushed me and filled my suit with blood, but it was only the worldship that broke beneath me. I did not cower, or flee, or lower my blade. As upon the fields of Deira then I moved, sliding sideways across time, unharmed.

Voidmaker needed time for proper calibration. Absent that calibration, it would fail to annihilate everything within the impact radius. No quark, no lepton, no photon could escape its touch when rightly tuned, leaving

nothing—true nothing—in its wake. Even now, the thought makes me shiver. To think how narrowly I had escaped that fate myself.

I had to buy time, to stand, to *endure*.

This was why I had come to Dharan-Tun, why I had left Cassandra in the shuttle.

I would not make the mistake I made on Danu again.

This time, I would be victorious—and die.

Ol blansga im.

Let me have you.

Ol arpaga im.

Let me take you.

—*amizpaga im.*

—*join with you.*

“No!”

She hurled herself at me. Every one of her. Every facet. Every fractured image. Ushara and Ushara and Ushara closed about me, each sliding through the air without motion, her white arms outstretched. Hadrian and Hadrian and Hadrian answered her, my will fractured across time. She clawed at me like ten thousand furies unleashed from the final hell, and ten thousand times I answered her, flickering across time, will stretching further and further—wider and wider—across the limitless now. Had some observer stood there on the ice, he would have seen—what would he have seen? A blur of countless hands, of faces turned, of my sword bristling, burning the void like the afterimages of some searing flash.

When the machines had battled one another, the whole of their conflict had happened in an instant, countless of their imagined race slaughtered on either side in that first and final instant of war. So it was then. How many times must she have slaughtered me? Torn me limb from limb, as she had poor Muzugara and his ilk in the Pantheon of the Vaiartu on Sabratha?

An infinity, and a greater infinity than the one in which I survived.

But I had survived, and she backed off, figures floating, circling around, flickering like a faltering holograph, her lithe form adopting first one posture, then the next.

She closed again, and her coming was like the inrush of the sea when a

dike has broken, a flood to annihilate the world. Still, I answered her, sword raised, a symbol of man's defiance—not defiance itself. No blade could cut *that* devil down, no mortal weapon wound. Her flesh was air and fire, not water and wet clay.

But I could defy her.

The power the Absolute had given me was enough, enough to choose, to prevent her choosing, and so I strove with her in mind. My will alone prevented her destroying me.

I slipped, and a hand like iron caught my ankle, and I was hoisted unceremoniously into the air and hurled across the snow. The impact might have ended my life, or forced my suit to lock and save my flesh from injury. But I fell across time as well, and landed catlike on my feet.

“Ushara!” I roared.

She stood upon the ice. All black her eyes, without any whites in them. Only the irises like yellow flame. Her beauty was turned all to horror, and her floating hair hung limp across her face. It seemed in that moment then that I saw through her, as I had that night in Phanamhara. However beautiful her form, however wondrous her beginning, she had become a thing of crawling nightmare.

I felt her hatred for me—and for all living things—as a thing external, a fire to take the world. I screamed with the heat of it, and fell to my knees, chest heaving, cords all taut. She hated, *hated* with a fever I could scarce take in, a hatred to blacken the stars and boil away the very foam of space. It burned! Burned! Burned me! That all-consuming hatred, that loathing of all that was and would be.

She would destroy me. The flame in her was like the fire of creation, like the light of *Voidmaker* itself. She could have slaughtered me an infinite number of ways, I knew. Torn my flesh to pieces, or turned my bones to dust. She might have crushed me, or poured lightning through me, or boiled me in my armor.

But she hesitated.

Something had changed.

Some quality of the light. A glassy, almost fibrous shine. I froze, saw

filaments of blue-white scintillate upon the void between us, as if refracted by some medium where there should be none. Ushara looked at me, her comprehension coming—like mine—too late. Those threads of azure light intensified, streamed together, coalesced in one place, on one target.

On her.

She stood perhaps ten paces from me then, her feet mere inches above the snow. Her hand reached out, and, like Dorayaica's, it seemed to stretch across that emptiness to seize me and crush me.

Too late.

The light of creation streamed down from heaven and tore through her then, a beam of killing white. It was the same light I had seen in the instant I left Dorayaica's palace behind. *Voidmaker's* light.

Orphan had taken its shot. It must have moved the machine nearer to Dharan-Tun, placed the firing mechanism under the guidance of the Archon's own daimon—for how else could it have targeted the Watcher so precisely? Picked out a target seeming the size of a man against the white background of that world?

Ushara screamed, and the sound of it shook creation to its atoms.

Then, there was nothing.

Silence. Darkness. Day.

I was alone, standing in the snow on the skin of Dharan-Tun. Where the demoness had stood, there was nothing. Only a gaping chasm, a hole in the world.

I was alone . . .

My knees buckled, and ice crunched beneath me.

She was gone. *Gone*.

It was impossible. She could not be . . . dead?

I knelt in numb silence then a long while, hardly daring to breathe. It was a trick, it had to be. Another of her deceptions. But no reprisal came. No sign or sound, no word, or blow, or instant of sudden terror.

Lightning had fallen from a clear, black sky . . . and a god died.

Numb fingers scrabbled for the comm my brain had forgotten was still there. "Target destroyed," I managed, mouth terribly dry. "Orphan! Orphan!

This is Marlowe. Confirming total destruction of the target. Orphan, this is Marlowe. Do you read?" It would be some time before the giant heard my words, some time more before he could reply, but it did not matter. The mere act of speech—that simple message, that ordinary thing—made the truth of the moment more solid. The battle still raged in the dark above, neither mankind nor Palekind knowing that the battle was over.

We had ended it, Orphan and I.

"Orphan—" If the creature had dispatched a shuttle at my last communication, it might be there in a matter of minutes. Ought I activate my emergency beacon? The Cielcin below me were bound to pick it up. How quickly could they reach me? Where was their nearest sally port?

But Orphan knew my location, I realized. It had used me to track Ushara.

There was nothing left for me to do.

It was done. All of it.

Done.

Ten minutes passed in blessed silence, still several minutes more. A shadow passed overhead, passed between Ywain and Dharan-Tun, and looking up I saw the black shape of one of our ships, its repulsors shining like false stars. As it crouched upon the ice, I rose, and staggered toward its lowering ramp.

When I saw who it was there waiting for me, I hurried faster, arms outstretched to embrace my rescuer.

"Abba!" Cassandra threw her arm around me. "You're alive!"

"It's done!" I said. "Anaryan, it's done. Dorayaica. Ushara. They're . . ." I didn't have to say it. She knew.

"We have to go," she said, and broke from me. "Lorian is waiting."

"Lorian?" I was shocked. I had not expected that. "Where?"

She took my hand. "Whatever you did, Lorian says it took the heart out of the worldship. This whole place is going to collapse. We thought you were dead already—" Her voice broke. "But Orphan told us you survived. You—"

It was my turn to shake her back into herself. "Where is Lorian?"

“In orbit,” she said. “He brought *Mistwalker* in close.”

Her face was lost behind her visor, but I could hear the ragged, breathless quality to her words. “We have to go!”

I joined her on the ramp. The airlock was waiting for us, its black door a gate leading to a bright but uncertain future. When I reached the top of the ramp, I looked back. I could still see the place where *Voidmaker* had left its mark.

A hole in the world. A fault in creation.

“What is it?” Cassandra’s hand was on my shoulder.

I could only shake my head. “It’s nothing, I—” It was over. I could scarce believe it. I took a breath. “Let’s go.”

The inner door opened.

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CHAPTER 76

OUROBOROS

THE RAMP DESCENDED, AND a pale light streamed in. The light of a false day, cast by the long sun that ran the length of the spinship's mighty bay. I stepped out, leading Cassandra and the two Pale into the gray city that lay at the heart of *Mistwalker*.

"That's far enough!" The voice that greeted us—as our eyes still adjusted to the cold, revealing light—was familiar: a thing high and sharp, totally controlled.

Lorian stood waiting. I saw him standing there, a small, dark blur amidst greater ones. I heard his cane strike steel. "Hands where I can see them!"

"What?" I blinked, raised one hand to shade my eyes. *Hands where*—"Lorian, what is this?"

My feet rang on the gangway, their music flat and distant. I blinked again, saw the little Commandant—my friend—swing into focus. He was standing in the midst of an arc of Roundtable dragoons. Their eyes shone like the obols laid on the eyes of the dead.

I was still reeling, disoriented, exhausted, overwhelmed. It was the longest day of my life—and it was yet so far from over. The black ship had carried us swiftly from Dharan-Tun to *Mistwalker*. The flight had lasted a matter of minutes. The Extrasolarian ship had received us, and spirited us into its secret heart. There had been no sign that anything was amiss. Lorian had acted his usual self, terse and jocular in turn, pretending that he had not just orchestrated a rescue from the heart of the enemy's fleet in the midst of the greatest naval battle in human history.

A rescue? A kidnapping.

An arrest.

Lorian raised his needler, leveled it at my face. "I said *put your hands*

where I can see them, Marlowe. Please.” He removed the safety.

I felt Cassandra stir at my side, guessed her own hand had flashed to her shield emitter.

“You too, darling,” Lorian said, whole face shuttered like a lamp. “You’ve done a man’s job, Hadrian. More than a man’s. But it’s over now.”

“It’s over,” I said, not raising my hands, “when you tell me what on Earth is going on. What is this about, Lorian?”

“What this is *about*?” Lorian sneered. “What this is *about*! This is about what it’s always been about, Marlowe! Survival! Our survival!” He raised a hand, encompassing his people, his ship. “My *people*’s survival. I—”

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach. A sucking, ulcerous wound. “Lorian,” I said, “what have you done?”

The Supreme Commandant did not hesitate. “I’ve made a deal to ensure that survival.”

“The Chantry,” I said. “You made a deal with the Chantry.”

Was that a tear on the little man’s face? “I give them you, they give us peace.”

“You don’t believe that,” I said, advancing a step.

“Don’t!” Lorian’s voice cracked, and he brandished his needler. “Come any closer! I will shoot you, Hadrian.”

“The battle isn’t even over!” I snarled. The whole of *Mistwalker* shuddered, as if agreeing with me. “You need me.”

Lorian shook his head. “By now Lord Tarquin’s people will have taken *Demiurge*.”

“What?”

“Your man, Edouard,” Lorian said. “He’s been feeding them information from the start.”

“What?” Cassandra shouldered past me, placed herself in the line of fire. “That’s impossible! Edouard would never—”

Lorian turned the gun on her. “Think!” he said. “Who else knew you went down to Dharan-Tun? Who else knew about your little suicide mission?”

Almost it felt as if time’s tide had risen about my ankles once again, and

the sand beneath my feet was washing away. I felt that sense of dislocation one feels standing on the margins of the sea as the surf ebbs back, when it seems the world itself rotates beneath you, and you alone are unmoved.

Lorian . . . and Edouard. But they were both adorators! Their peoples, sworn enemies of the Cult of Earth, had been its victims for generations. Why would they—

“You’re lying!” Cassandra said. “You little monster!”

Lorian shut his eyes. He aimed his weapon at the deck between us, fired. The needler *cracked*, and the shot blew to pieces where it struck the treated metal. “Don’t call me that,” he said. “I am what I *have* to be—same as you.”

“Lorian, don’t do this,” I said. “They’ll betray you, you know they will.”

“That’s fine,” Lorian said. “By the time they do, I’ll be ready. Besides, you already dealt them a mortal wound. The galaxy knows what they are now.” He compressed his lips, looked away. “Is it really done?”

I blinked. “Dorayaica?”

He swallowed. “Is it . . . dead?”

I considered not answering him.

“Yes.”

There *were* tears on the cacogen’s face. “Then it’s done,” said he. “Our people are avenged.”

“Our people?” I snarled. “We are the last of *our* people, Lorian, and you are here selling me to Earth!”

“Valka, forgive me . . .” he said.

“You dare!” It was not I who spoke. “You dare bring Amma into this!”

How swift is Time, Ever-Fleeting, rushing ever into night. Cassandra lurched forward. I shouted her name, made to grab at her. But she was on my right, and had no left hand to seize. Her right went to her belt, and that was all the provocation the Roundtable soldiers needed.

All Lorian needed.

The little man turned his hand. A finger moved. A mechanism. Somewhere within that antique weapon—relic of his days on Belusha—a

needle moved. The bolt was tungsten—wolfram—narrower at either end than in the middle, so that it spun as it flew, and cut the air.

It struck Cassandra in the forehead, just above the eye, and tore out the back of her head with a force that blew her skull to pieces.

I screamed. The deck groaned beneath me, and distantly—as if worlds away—I heard a series of cracking, hissing, breaking sounds as my will tore the world around me. The lighted eyes of every dragoon’s helm went dead, and the Roundtable women panicked. I had some vague sense that Ramanthanu and Otomno were still behind me—could hardly see through rage and tears.

Lorian was before me. His own face wet with tears.

“You!” I could hardly speak.

I lurched forward. All the grief that I had ever felt at any instant of my life redoubled then, echoed in a skull empty of thought, of reason, of light—of everything but pain.

Lorian shot at me, but his shot found nothing but air.

I took another step, another. Another. The space between us vanished, and I caught Lorian by the throat. One hand was enough, and more than enough.

The man weighed hardly more than a child, and for all his finery, his medallions, his golden braid, he kicked like one, but his blows were as the banging of small fists against a distant door. I lifted him bodily into the air and squeezed, heedless of the world around me, of the dragoons desperate to regain their sight. I had only the vaguest sense that my cry—my power—had shorted all the electronics nearby. Sensors and cameras, lights and gun emplacements.

I still have no notion *how*.

I only *squeezed*. I squeezed until Lorian’s black-veined face turned palest blue, until foam flecked his papery lips, until one of his false eyes emerged half from its socket, and he expired like the common criminal he had chosen to become.

A murderer. A traitor. And a thief.

He had taken my daughter. My daughter . . .

I had to go to her, had to see her before the dragoons regained their bearings. I would be dead in seconds . . .

Let the last thing I see be her face . . .

She had fallen face up, so that the worst of her devastation was concealed. One single rivulet of crimson blood ran from her forehead to her hair, the entry wound no larger than a thumbnail. The rest of it lay upon the deck, a halo of perfect red.

I fell to my knees beside her, feeling at once a tightness and terrible cold.

I had spared the universe for her sake, but it had not spared her.

I shut my eyes, put my hands up on my head . . . and froze.

I had no memory of putting on my helmet. I had removed it after we left the airlock on the black ship. But it was there, firmly in place. I could hear the distant ping of internal instruments, the whir of ventilation. Shuddering, gasping, face still wet with tears, I opened my eyes, sure that what I was seeing was not real.

I was kneeling on the ice still, on the skin of Dharan-Tun. The wound Orphan had dealt that world with *Voidmaker* still yawned before me, a tunnel down into night.

I was alone.

Alone . . . alone . . .

Cassandra had not come for me.

Not yet.

A vision? Was that all?

I had never experienced anything quite like it. In the past, when I had been shown the future, it was as a thing nebulous and vague. Often my premonitions had been imagistic, symbolic, more akin to dreams.

This had been a waking nightmare.

I could still see her face, her halo of blood. I was still kneeling. My hand still ached from where I had crushed Lorian's life in my fist. I worked stiff fingers.

Lorian . . . had betrayed me. And Edouard. That much, at least, was

surely true. How many times in my life had I gleaned true knowledge from those memories of lives unlived? This was no different.

A shadow passed by overhead, between Ywain and Dharan-Tun, and looking up I saw the ship approaching, repulsors shining like eyes in the dark. It lowered itself upon the ice like a bird settling in to nest, and I rose shakily, blinking back my tears.

There she was, stomping down the ramp just as before. “Abba!” She embraced me. “You’re alive!”

I said nothing, and sensing my disquiet, she said, “What is it?”

I held her fiercely, crushed her to myself. Still I did not speak, not for a long moment. Then I drew her out before me, held her at arm’s length. How I longed to see her face, whole and unbloodied. But our helms denied us. “Ask me later.”

“Lorian is waiting!” she said. “Orphan said you did it, that they’re—”

“It’s done,” I said, and drew her close once more. “It’s done, Anaryan. Dorayaica. Ushara . . .”

“We have to go,” she said. “Whatever you did, Lorian said—”

“The worldship is collapsing,” I said. “I know.”

She was silent, hesitated. “You know?”

“*Voidmaker*,” I said. “We used it on the ship’s core. The palace. Some of the fuel supply was surely compromised. There’ll be cascading failures.” She made to pull me toward the ramp. I stopped. “We should make for *Aurora* directly. The Emperor is in danger.”

“The Emperor?” She blinked at me. “We’re heading to *Mistwalker*.”

“No,” I said. “No, Lorian is compromised. He’s made a deal with the Chantry.”

“He . . . what?”

I was already on the ramp. “Come on!” I said, not stopping to elaborate. “We have to go! Now!”

• • •

“Alert,” the ship’s daimon intoned, “*foreign agent detected in primary control system. Attempting to isolate.*”

I cursed, tore myself from the shuttle’s command chair. The shuttle was infested. Lorian’s people had deployed a daimon of their own, or else deployed some other cyberian measure. It was an attack for which I’d no defense. What passed in machine plane might as well be happening in the orbit of some distant quasar, for all the good I could do about it.

“Abba?”

“Draw swords,” I said, looking to my daughter and the two Pale. “They’re taking us in.”

The ship’s daimon had gone silent.

We were lost.

“Abba, it’s Lorian!” Cassandra said.

“I know!” I said. “But *Lorian* just set a daimon against us. The ship is lost.”

“Why is he doing this?” she asked.

“He thinks he can make a deal with the Princes of Earth,” I said. “He wants Sagara’s kingdom back. Wants to start again.”

“He thinks he can trust them?” She sounded shocked. “How do you know this?”

I stopped to look at her. Her pale face; her blue-black Marlowe hair; her mother’s hard green eyes. Again I saw that little river of blood above her eye, the red halo spreading on *Mistwalker*’s iron decking. “I’ve seen it.”

Cassandra blanched, said nothing.

“*Ba-Aeta-doh*,” Ramanathanu said. “What shall we do?”

“Two and two,” I said, gesturing. “Spread out, pick a defensible position. They’ll come aboard to pull us out. They’ll have sent a security detachment. Half a hundred men—maybe more. We’ll need another ship. We’ll have to fight our way out.”

I’d use Lorian as a hostage if I had to.

“Cassandra, with me.”

• • •

We lay in wait a long time, listening as the capture clamps closed on our vessel's external brackets. Cassandra's face was white as we heard the clangor and distant drums of unseen machines as our ship was brought through the docking port and several airlocks into *Mistwalker's* vast, central hold. Her eyes went wide at the sound of boots in the hall outside.

"GAL-4, GAL-6: *Take left.*" A woman's voice, artificially amplified.
"GAL-2 and -5: *with me.*"

"Door," said another. "*Just ahead. On left.*"

"Clear it."

"Clear."

"Next."

These were no Interfaced. The Interfaced had no need for speech.

My hand tightened on the hilt of my sword. I looked at Cassandra. She nodded, jaw clenched.

I held up a hand, listening.

Dropped it.

The door opened, and two Latarran dragoons aimed short-stocked rifles at us. Their shots crashed against our shields, their shouts echoed off the walls. But their armor was not enough, and both of them fell screaming. Another shot caromed off my shield, and turning I saw two more dragoons rushing up the hall toward us. Cassandra leaped past me—actually *leaped*—her feet running along the wall as she passed me by. A third dragoon appeared from a side passage, struck my daughter from behind with the butt of her gun.

Before she could right herself, the dragoon that had checked her pressed her muzzle to the back of Cassandra's head, bypassed her shield.

It was happening again.

I screamed, rushed forward.

My scream drowned the noise of the shot as my daughter's blood turned to steam. The shuttle sparked and broke around me as I reached Cassandra's killer. I seized her by the jaw and slammed her head against the relief image that dominated the inner bulkhead. Again. Again. Again. It showed a city of

square towers dominated by a single mighty pyramid. An orb—was it the sun?—floated in the sky.

Hadn't there been a dragon?

There was blood, a red halo, a sunburst like the banner of empire, and the woman's helm sparked and splintered in my fist.

I turned to face her sisters, blood-soaked, bellowing. And when they were dead, I sank to my knees amid the carnage, felt snow beneath me as a shadow passed overhead.

Again.

Another vision.

"Abba!" This time I did not rise, and Cassandra knelt, a hand on my shoulder. "You're alive!"

"You're alive!" I blinked up at her through tears. "You're alive."

"I'm fine!" she said. "Abba, Lorian is waiting."

"No!" I said, and pulled her hand away. "No, no we make for *Demiurge*. We warp direct."

"What?"

"Lorian has betrayed us."

But if Edouard had betrayed us . . . could we still go to *Demiurge*? Was Orphan alive?

"Abba, are you all right?"

I did not answer her, not for a long time. A light filled the sky above us, heralding the death of yet another worldship. My enemies had made their move while I moved to save them. Whilst I was in the depths of Dharan-Tun, locked in combat with the Prophet itself, they had sprung their trap.

The Emperor, most likely, was dead. *Demiurge* may well have fallen . . .

Where then could I go?

I knew the answer, had known nearly all my life.

Forward. Down.

Ragama's words, so deep they were more felt than heard, reverberated through me.

Seek hardship. She said. *Do what must be . . .*

"We have to go," I said. "To *Demiurge*."

I stood, strode past her. The visions—were they visions?—were a gift. A mercy. I was so near the end. So close to victory that time itself looped and bent before me, bowed at my feet.

He would not let me fail.

• • •

I knelt once more upon the snow, haunted by the memory of Lorian's face—his black-seamed cheeks streaked with tears as he ordered us to surrender. To power down our warp array.

I had refused.

He shot us, I thought, numb. *He shot us out of the sky . . .*

"Abba!" Cassandra was hurrying across the snow.

I could not bear to see her die again.

But I went. Half dragged myself up the ramp. The ramp closed. The inner door opened.

• • •

This time, they struck us with an electromagnetic pulse. A NEM weapon not unlike the ones I had used to try to slay Ushara on Sabratha. We lost all power. Primary engines. The ship's daimon. Life support.

Gravity.

It had been centuries since I fought in freefall—had only fought in freefall a handful of times. Cassandra never had.

But the dragoons? They moved as though born in it, bounded through the blown hatchway like sharks. Ramanthanu tore through them, its Jaddian blade carving crimson in the air. I recall striking a bulkhead—the image of the city and the dragon—kicked off it, tangling with one of Lorian's amazons.

"GAL-5—!"

My blade took her in the ribs, and I let her body drift away.

Boom.

One of the others had thrown a grenade, relied on the concussive force to bypass our shields. I turned, saw what remained of Otomno and the lop-horned captain splash against the door at the end of the hall. The close quarters funneled the blast down the corridor, and the force of it hurled me backward. One of the Roundtable dragoons had Cassandra in a triangle hold, her arm trapped. Her sword spun unkindled through the air as they struggled, her Jaddian-altered thews straining against the amazon's machine-assisted sinews. They were falling toward me, propelled by the same blast.

Crack.

I felt a cool wind on my face, discerned the breath of my helmet ventilators.

• • •

How many times had it been?

The four of us surged down the ramp, armored, shielded, asked no questions. Lorian cursed and fell back beneath the force of our onslaught, and the Roundtable dragoons panicked.

It wasn't enough.

Though we escaped the shuttle pad, we never made it far. *Mistwalker* itself was set against us.

We never reached another ship.

• • •

We never reached *Demiurge*.

No matter what we did, Lorian destroyed us, or crippled us, or boarded the ship. I saw Cassandra killed again and again and again. And

Ramanthanu. And Otomno. And there was nothing I could do. What I'd thought was mercy curdled to cruelty black as any I had ever known. To suffering. To nightmare.

There was no escape. No escape.

Again and again I came back.

"Abba!" Cassandra ran to me. "You're alive!"

I shouldered her aside. Closed the ramp.

I could not stop, not until it was over. Not until she was safe.

The door opened.

• • •

Did I dare remain on Dharan-Tun? Seek out some other ship?

It was no doubt a hundred miles to the nearest gate to the underworld, might be hours before we found a port. Ramanthanu could fly one of the Pale ships, could take us to *Demiurge*. If we could but find it, reckoning blind in the night with only Edouard's telegraph to guide us.

Edouard . . .

I hadn't told her.

• • •

The Cielcin caught us in the dark. Killed Ramanthanu and Otomno.

I wished they killed Cassandra and myself.

• • •

Dharan-Tun cracked beneath us, torn apart by the cascading failure of its fuel cells.

That, at least, was mercy.

• • •

I longed for death, for sleep, for an end to consciousness, for the oblivion I knew would never come.

We died, and we died, and *she* died. Over and over and over again until I could bear it no longer, and always she returned, rushing down the ramp, so filled with purpose, so sure of herself . . . so relieved.

So unaware of what had happened. What was happening.

What would never stop.

• • •

“Abba!” she said again, for the first time, “You’re alive!”

“Abba?”

I did not answer her. How could I?

Even if I did, it wouldn’t matter.

I just sat there, kneeling in the snow. She tried to drag me away. Failed. Thinking me catatonic, she went for Ramanthanu.

They would not let me die.

• • •

“Abba!”

• • •

“Abba?”

• • •

It was happening again.

It would never stop.

Lorian shot her again. Her crimson halo spread out on the deck.

This time no shout came, no sound of fury or of power.

"This is a dream," I said to Lorian, seated across the table from him. The ship shook around us. I knew we had left Ywain's orbit, were streaking for Cynon and what remained of the Imperial fleet.

"Some dream," he said, and drew out his needler. "They want you alive."

"I know."

"I can say you resisted," Lorian said.

I looked at him, at the face of the friend I had loved, of the face of one I now hated more than the Prophet itself. My daughter's killer. A thousand times her killer. "Is this mercy, Aristedes?"

"It is *ataraxia*," he said, using the proper term. "Until your next life."

It was almost like he knew.

"No," I said.

He shot me anyway, a manic smile—like the square-edged grimace of his Monarch—coloring his colorless face.

• • •

"Abba! You're alive!"

Was I?

Or was this hell? Maybe all life is hell, if hell is where it takes us. *All the road to Paradise is Paradise*, one ancient sage observed. Was it not so with the reverse?

I laughed, startled my poor, doomed daughter. It was not a joyous sound.

"Am I, daughter?" I asked, and looked at her. "Are we? Alive?"

We had both been dead so many times.

Cassandra blinked at me.

"Are we alive if time has stopped moving forward?"

Time had ceased running down, had ceased to run at all. You have heard that time slows down about the great lanterns called suns, and that in those black places where all light is drowned, time stops entirely. It is so. But there are other places, Reader, places where time does not stop, but wanders aimless, swirling through those higher spaces like pigment dropped into oil. Places where time curls back upon itself.

“We’ve done all this before,” I said. “Don’t you remember?”

“What are you talking about?”

I looked round at her, blinking behind my mask. Had they not tried precisely this thing before? On Danu? “This is a dream,” I said, just as I had said to Lorian. “But it isn’t my dream.”

“I don’t understand . . .”

They wanted me to suffer, wanted me to *stop*.

They wanted my despair.

I looked at her, wishing I could see her face—could stop seeing her death, that bloody halo . . . “You want me to end it,” I said, and Dharan-Tun convulsed beneath my feet, threatening the collapse that would never *really* come. “If I kill myself, I die in despair, and I won’t return.” I turned my back then, mounting the ramp.

Cassandra hurried after me, but before she could overtake me, I said, “Up ramp.”

“Abba!” She was too late. I watched the sunlit night and snow vanish, heard my daughter scream. “Wait!”

“You’re not you,” I said, and shut my eyes.

“Abba, please!”

I just stood there in the airlock, waiting, listening to the sounds of her desperate attempt for entry, her cries. *This isn’t real*, I told myself again and again. *This isn’t real. This isn’t real.*

The hammering stopped, and all the lights went out at once, until it seemed I might have returned to the waters beyond time, that formless void—but for the deck beneath my feet.

The inner door opened, and the light of stars shone through. A wind blew in from beyond, and—placing a hand on the hilt of my sword—I

stepped out into the moonlit night. The stars were strange. I did not know the moon, a pale thing and silver, the size of a thumbnail. Cypress trees rose to either side, forming an allée, a lane through the trees.

The door shut behind me, and turning I saw not my shuttle's hatch, but a paneled gate, green-painted. It was so dark beneath those trees, and close as the walls of a cavern, but there was a light ahead, faint in the distance. I moved toward it, listening to the wind, the noise of insects and of birds. It was so quiet . . .

I reached the end of the allée, and what I saw froze my blood.

Dead ahead, away over rolling hills and a river black with starlight, there rose a grand, white pyramid.

I knew exactly where I was, and looked up at that silver moon in shock and wonder.

I heard a scream. There was an opening in the allée to my left, and turning I saw a garden of low hedges and standing palms. A temple or castle rose over it, dominated by a slim, round tower of dressed stone. A woman, red haired and naked as Ushara herself, staggered onto the path, and as I emerged from the allée, she fell. There were tears on her face, and bruises, and terror plain as day.

She looked at me—and at first I thought her terror was *of* me. But she did not see me. Her eyes pierced through me, desperate for escape, as if the shadows of the trees might save her.

"Selene!" I cried, surging forward.

She did not hear me.

Just then another sound broke the night. The sound of applause. Then a man appeared, naked himself, but for a mask of beaten gold, and seeing the princess on all fours, he surged forward, leaping a low hedge. I drew my blade, advanced to slay the vile boy, and as I did, I saw the masked, robed shapes of other men—and women, too—watching with delight.

This isn't real, I thought, this isn't real.

My blade passed clean through Selene's attacker without harming him, and her cries split Earth's warm night.

Ti noan trian.

It will be.

Ti noan faphen.

It

must be.

Her voice—neither male nor female and both at once—filled my ears. Distantly, as on some far-off Roman hill, I heard the pealing of bells. I whirled, half expecting to see Ushara standing there, face disfigured by that leering, impossible grin.

Instead, I saw the obscene black sculpture and the throne upon *Demiurge*. Orphan sat upon it, a hole still smoking in its black-haired head. The white-haired face was breathing hard, shared chest heaving. Our eyes met, and it whispered, “You . . . betrayed me.”

Then it shuddered, and died.

Stunned, I turned back, and looking out the window I saw the countless towers of the bowsprit shattered, while Chantry vessels—white pyramids—drew ever nearer. I heard feet on the decking behind, the tramp of countless boots, and half expecting to see Lord Tarquin or Yod or one of their ilk, I turned, saw William lying in his bed, watched as Doctor Vrabel tugged a white shroud up over his disfigured face.

And Alexander took the throne, and set aside the golden laurel crown in favor of a scarlet *nemes* which the Patriarch of Earth set upon his brow.

“Enough!” I said, reaching for the telegraph on my belt. “Enough of these lies!”

I had not killed her. That had been a part of the lie.

This isn’t real.

But something was. Somewhere. Beyond the visions, beyond the nightmare.

I shut my eyes, but the visions would not cease.

Man murdered man, armies turned on one another. Martians battled common legionaries, black ships against black ships. Men raised up painted banners with the mark of my own red star. “For the Emperor!” they cried. “For God and Emperor!”

And I knew their Emperor was me.

Am ipamis agan ti.

You cannot stop it.

Am gedom agadan ti.

You will never stop it.

Ga teloch ge nomig.

Not even in death.

Though still I held shut my eyes, I beheld then a palace black as the Dhar-Iagon itself, a dark tower rising—pillar upon pillar, gallery over gallery, battlement after battlement above a white city and a gray sea where gulls turned in the air. I stood then amid a great many people, was ushered forward by their tide, along half-remembered streets to a piazza unrolled at the foot of that monstrous palace. There clambered a multitude—men and women and children, hermaphrodites and androgyns and homunculi beyond description. Irchtani there were among them, and one at least of the giants of Sadal Suud. There were men of races I could not name, and creatures less than man. I spied countless of the Umandh of Emesh gathered there, long feelers tasting the salt air.

And there were the Cielcin, dreadful tall and grave, standing cheek by jowl, shoulder to shoulder with the scions of Earth's poisoned tree.

"Prophecy!" all cried with one voice, in one tongue. "Prophecy!"

Soldiers appeared on the loggia above the gates of the palace, holding the Imperial *flabella*. Behind them came monks in black and scarlet, with crowns of dripping wax upon their heads made by so many lighted candles. And there she came—last of all—a woman pale and naked as Ushara herself, her black hair singly braided, trailing almost on the tiled floor.

"Oracle, O Oracle!"

"Speak!"

Cassandra raised her arms, and the left gleamed black as her eyes. Whatever words she spoke were lost, drowned out by the ecstasy of the throng, and when she was done speaking, she drew aside and knelt as a figure emerged onto the loggia, a figure mightier and more terrible than she. His flesh was pale, his hair long and dark as evening, his face as familiar to me as my own . . .

It was myself I saw standing naked with Cassandra on the loggia.

It was Miudanar.

<i>This shall be.</i>		
<i>Annûm ibasshi.</i>	<i>You will fail.</i>	
<i>Oi noan trian.</i>		<i>Fall.</i>
<i>You cannot stop it.</i>	<i>Im ipamis agan ti.</i>	
<i>Im trian ge agan ti.</i>	<i>You will never stop it.</i>	
	<i>Not even in death.</i>	
<i>Oi noan faphen.</i>	<i>Oi noan faphen.</i>	
<i>This—</i>	<i>Oi noan faphen.</i>	
<i>Annûm lû ibasshi.</i>	<i>Oi noan faphen.</i>	
<i>Oi noan faphen.</i>	<i>—must—</i>	
<i>Yû pen er wennen.</i>	<i>Annûm lû ibasshi.</i>	
<i>—be.</i>	<i>Yû pen er wennen.</i>	<i>Yû pen</i>
<i>er wennen.</i>		
		<i>Yû pen er</i>
<i>wennen . . .</i>		

Her words were a poison dripped into my soul.

His words . . . in their mouths. It was more than I could stomach, more than I could bear.

They had both survived, conspired to trap me in this nightmare.

If they could not kill me, they would trap me there for all eternity, living and dying—living again—caught in a never-ending cycle, because they knew the Absolute would not let me die. They wanted me to suffer, wanted my despair.

The vision all dissolved, until only Cassandra and my other self remained: Ushara and Miudanar, standing both naked above me, descending. About us, all was dark.

But I felt ice crack beneath my feet. Was it a vision? A waking dream? A life un-lived? A branch of time, unreal, unrealized, made real by the gods I defied?

With one hand I drew forth my blade, with the other grasped the telegraph. I had no hope left. Only defiance. Only faith.

“I will not stop,” I said, and conjured my sword. “This will not be the end.”

The air about me cracked, space itself suddenly luminous, and I knew my prayer was answered. *Voidmaker* had fired once again.

The Watchers at once perceived their danger, and the web they’d woven

tore. I stood alone before them on the ice of Dharan-Tun beneath black daylight, while above—far away—the instrument that might have been their undoing fired.

I leaped away in time, feet splashing in the waters of eternity. The world changed, and I was standing—still on Dharan-Tun—above a crater about whose rim spun the coils of a particle accelerator. I knew I had passed several hundred miles at a step, that far away a fresh crater had just opened in the face of the worldship.

I heard a roar like the ringing of bells, and Ushara appeared, resolving from nothingness. She flew at me, arms distended, stretched and outstretched. I wheeled to face her, and the hilt of my sword sparked, the blade hissing as it was extinguished sure as any candleflame. She fell atop me, a beast of monstrous weight. The Watcher lowered herself on me like a spider, her hands—numberless—held every part of me to the ground.

I struggled in vain, reaching across time, flickering through state after state, desperate for an escape that could not come. I felt the seals in my armor hiss as they were crushed. My vision went dark as my entoptics died. I was losing air, and my suit tried to seal itself. Alarms rang in my ears.

But the trigger was still in my hand.

She must have guessed my intention, understood the shape of her danger. I could not move my hand! Her weight was on me, all her preternatural strength. I was pinned, as a wrestler to the mat, and the ice beneath me cracked. Only my suit preserved me, and that was failing fast. I screamed—every one of me screamed—every iteration, every potential, across every fluctuation of the endless *now*. It took all of us to move our hand, *my* hand. To strain against the weight and will of the god who would crush me like the insect I was.

I felt my shoulder *pop*, fibers tearing as they had torn above the gates of the Dhar-Iagon, that old injury returning. I screamed, but it was enough. My hand moved, my thumb moved. White hot my agony shone then, brighter than any sun, brighter than the shot from *Voidmaker*.

But it was enough.

My fingers closed on the remote at my side, thumb hammering the

switch that sent the signal running—faster than light—across the emptiness to the ship and weapon that awaited it, and in the instant I pressed that button, she perceived her danger.

Her brother had already fled.

At once her weight and dreadful presence vanished.

Too late.

At once I heard—every man and Cielcin about Ywain heard—a cry go out through creation, without medium or source—a cry of anguish, of pain, of ultimate suffering.

But it had not destroyed her.

It did not destroy me.

There had been no time to properly calibrate the weapon—not between shots. Whatever it had done, it had not annihilated all matter, all energy within the effected radius.

Whatever it *had* done, it had *hurt* her.

Later, Lorian would tell me he saw a light, as through some shattered prism, so that the skies above Dharan-Tun were filled with broken images: a confusion of eyes and limbs, of starlight and sunlight of every shade and hue.

I had wounded the goddess, and—wounded—she had fled.

In her absence, my suit's systems struggled to restore themselves. The entoptics flickered on, revealing—as by countless, rapid eye blinks—the sunlit sky. I had fallen on my back, was lying faceup on the snow. I could not move, my suit still would not allow it. But I was alive, and—but for my torn and aching shoulder—I was unhurt.

How long had it been since the nightmare began? Ten thousand years it seemed, and yet it could not have been but a few minutes since I emerged on the worldship's surface. Orphan had likely not even received my message yet, had fired the weapon blindly.

It was a miracle I was alive.

She knew where I was. Wherever she had gone, she would return—however wounded. I had to get out of there. I tried, but my suit was locked in every joint, immobile. A faint alarm had begun chiming in my ear—a

little bell, like the monitor on a hospital bed—and an icon in the corner of my vision noted that the armor had lost integrity.

I would die before long, killed by the armor that had protected me for so many years.

I could not even take it off.

Dharan-Tun was to be my grave, after all. There was a certain *appropriateness* to that fact: that I should die upon its surface, not in its hollow heart.

That was when I saw it: the death of the Archon.

Ushara must have found it, pursued it through the night, moving through the space beyond time fast as thought. The light of its murder was like the blossoming of a flower in the heavens—or like the opening of a drain. *Voidmaker* was no larger than a coffin—but that was only her outer shell, the seal and anchor that tethered the weapon to our world.

The rest of it—nearly all of it—lay *beyond*.

The machines that had built the mighty weapon had placed its greater part at a remove from ordinary space, retreated along those higher dimensions until—from the vantage point of one stood in what you, Reader, conceive of as the *real*—it seemed small enough to hide within that coffin shell.

When Ushara left me in the sky above Dharan-Tun, she must have flown directly for it, smashed the weapon with all her strength. When I envision the scene, I see her—a pale figure, remote as any star—alight upon the nothingness before the little shell of our weapon. I see her seize the machine with fingers of pure force, and so rend the outer casement.

Then the whole of what lay hid within—beyond—that casing spills back into our reality like water from a hose. It expands in every direction, rushing through the hole Ushara made, breaking as it comes.

It was as though an entire city were born in the heavens above, a new Eternal City, a heavenly clime. All white it was, wrought of some crystalline substance that glittered like ice in the light of Gododdin's doomed sun. I saw components like huge, square towers ejected, saw the gridlines of circuitry like avenues and boulevards chased with gold. On it

came, spilling from the higher world into our own, tower after tower, street after street. And I saw whole towers founder, snapped in half, or torn from their foundations by the force of their emergence, as they came crashing into mere reality.

The whole thing spread across the sky, square miles of it appearing each passed moment, buildings compressed, stretching as the gravitational effect of the white hole spat matter across the world above. Already its outermost reaches were crumbling, local gravity and the speed of their ejection turning slabs of the weapon's arrays into shrapnel to fill the orbits around Dharan-Tun. Before long, the Cielcin worldship would have white rings all its own.

I would die there, killed when the goliath weapon came crashing down—if not sooner. Ushara knew where I was, where I had fallen.

She would return.

• • •

She did not return.

How long I lay upon the ice I never learned. Still I recall the chiming of my suit, and the way the pelagic cold crept into my body. I think I must have lost consciousness very many times. There could not have been much air left. Time and again, a burst of noise filled my helmet.

The wreckage of *Voidmaker* was still breaking apart—those parts of it that remained in orbit around Dharan-Tun. The greater part of it had been carried away, out into orbit around Ywain itself. It looked like a city: with its components like huge, square towers, its chasms like streets.

A white city, floating in the sky.

To think that so tremendous a thing had been concealed in so small a casement!

I felt the footsteps before I saw their owners. My heart sank when I saw them: two Cielcin, black clad, white masked, the familiar hoses swinging from cheek to shoulder, their hair stiff in the vacuum.

But they did not strike me.

I waited for the end to come. I did not realize—not until the larger of the two xenobites bent and offered me its hand—that it had only the one horn.

“You came . . .” I said, but the words did not escape my helmet. I could not take its offered hand.

Between them came one smaller than the others, her face helmeted in Imperial white. “Abba,” her voice sounded in my ears. She crouched beside me. My heart sank.

It was happening again.

Then she punched me in the chest. “What were you thinking?”

In the silence of my helm then, I wept.

It was her. It was *really* her.

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CHAPTER 77

THE DARKNESS AT THE END

THEY HAD TO CUT me out of my armor. Cassandra wielded the knife herself, and threw the components one by one across the floor of the airlock. The shuttle's daimon had already carried us away, taking us out from under *Voidmaker's* ruin as the first fast pieces of shrapnel began striking home. I slid in and out of consciousness, can recall every spasm of pain as my daughter and the two xenobites worked to free me and stabilize my injured arm, which they set in a sling fashioned from Cassandra's *mandyas*.

I winced as she rent the precious fabric, but she only looked at me, a brittle coldness in her face. She hardly spoke, and when she was done, she stood, and pushed past Ramanathanu and Otomno, making for some *other* part of our black ship. It was as though I'd been attended by a wheal of ball lightning, and that lightning departed.

"She is angry with you, I think, *ba-Aeta-doh*," Otomno said, speaking its own tongue.

I smiled, despite my exhaustion and the pain in my tortured arm.

I ordered the both of them to leave me, but when they withdrew it was only to the door of the vestibule. I could hear them whispering, voices hardly to be heard, and turning my head, I saw them framed against the opening, standing together, almost touching. As I watched, I saw Ramanathanu lay its hand flat against the other's breast—a gesture of affection, so alien to me in their kind.

"Do you think he is . . . *really* dead?" Otomno asked.

Ramanathanu blinked down at its inferior. "If the Marlowe says he is dead, he is dead."

"But *he* cannot die, master," said Otomno. "You know this. It is said."

The lop-horned captain seized its mate then by the horns, pulled its face

up toward its own. “You have seen Marlowe wound the very gods, Otomno. With your own eyes, you have seen it!” It shook its companion until Otomno admitted this was so. “There is none like him! Who else can do what he has done?”

“But he is not a god,” said Otomno.

Ramanthanu snarled, released the smaller xenobite.

“He means to destroy our kind,” said the smaller, and looking at me, realized I was listening. If it was possible for the creature to have blanched, it did then.

“I mean to destroy the Cielcin,” I said flatly then, and saying it knew—at last—that it was so, “so that *your kind* might become something else.”

Word of the death of the Prophet had yet to reach the system at large. Orphan ought to have received my transmission by then, but there was no telling what state the signal had been in when it arrived. Indeed, all that had passed on Dharan-Tun seemed almost to have happened in a vacuum. The bulk of the fighting was away in-system, about Cynon, and the wreck of Gododdin. Much has been said elsewhere of the heroism of the sons of men: of the bravery of the men of Mars, who turned aside the Cielcin charge, and saved Cynon from sharing in Gododdin’s fate. Who has not heard of the last stand of King Paeon? Who died with all his men to permit the Mandari to retreat toward Cynon when the anchor point beyond the ruin of Gododdin was overrun?

How can I make you see it? Truly see it?

Even I—who have drunk the waters of infinity and seen the very end of time—even I struggle to take in the totality of the conflict, to see the battle for what it was. It was too vast, too diluted. The forces at play then did shatter worlds and break ships like kindling, they deformed the very fabric of reality. When at last I felt well enough to stand, I limped to the nearest window—a narrow slice in the bulkhead, like an arrow slit. Through it I saw that ruinous world a final time.

Dharan-Tun . . .

Its face was turned away from us, so that I saw its twin engines—like monstrous eyes—and the wide, black line of its warp projectors, a chasm

that ran for nearly a third of its circumference. A plume of ice and dust rose where the first fallen parts of *Voidmaker* had struck her. At our distance, it seemed nothing moved at all. Not the worldship, nor its companions, nor the shrapnel of the mighty weapon that spread through the black about her.

It was silent in the close dark of the shuttle. I must have stood there a long time, for as I watched, the green face of the planet Ywain rolled across Dharan-Tun like the sealing stone of a tomb . . .

. . . and the black planet was lost.

I never saw it again.

Its collision with *Voidmaker* had been its undoing. Crippled, hobbled, unable to fly under its own power, it remained where I left it, in a slow orbit about the gas giant. In ten thousand years, or a hundred, it might have fallen from its place, burnt itself to cinders in Ywain's caustic atmosphere and plunged into the planet's sea of liquid hydrogen.

But its time was then measured in hours.

When at last I'd mastered myself, I walked swiftly along the black corridor, past the relief image of the dragon and the lonely aircraft.

I found Cassandra on the bridge, where I'd expected to find her. She stood—her *mandyas* discarded, her one hand hooked into her belt just above her sword. She did not turn to acknowledge my presence, only stood there, unmoving, her face turned toward the war outside. Unbidden, Ushara's final vision flashed in my mind, bright as any of the gunfire in the void. The black palace where Devil's Rest had been . . . my daughter standing naked on the balcony before the throng, her hands spread wide.

Prophecy! Prophecy!

I shut my eyes, but the pain was not extinguished.

"Never again," she said. "Never again, do you understand?"

How could I answer her? How could I even begin? I had lived years that day. Perhaps centuries.

"I would have gone with you, you know?"

I opened my eyes at last, found her still standing with her back to me, shoulders square against the broad slash of window glass. Though it hurt to

hear the pain in her voice, it was better . . . *so much better* than the false joy of Ushara's lie.

"I know," I said.

"It was my choice to make."

"It was," I allowed. "But I have my own choices to make. I will not lose you."

Her shoulders tightened, neck bent. "Lose me . . ." she echoed, fingers drumming on the hilt of her sword. "*Noyn jitat, Abba*. I"—she lingered on the word—"don't want to lose you, but I have." Her shoulders tightened even more, her head sunk lower still. "You're all I have, and I . . ."

I crossed the space between us, laid my good hand on her shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" She flinched, twisting to put a finger in my face. "If you want to die, then *die*! But stop making me watch!"

"Cassandra, I—"

"All my life, you've wished you were dead. You succeeded! And that *still* wasn't enough!" She stepped to within inches of me, and at once her fury collapsed, became something small and fragile as spun glass. "I know you miss Amma, and . . . everyone else. But you are *not* alone, and you do not have to do *this* alone—"

I embraced her, did not release her, though she tensed and pulled away. "It really is you," I said, and knew then a shred of what she must have felt when I returned to her upon *Mistwalker*.

It was over. I was back.

"What are you talking about?"

She let me hold her, as she had not since she was very small. Finally, I drew away, laid a hand on her face. "Anaryan, I—" I looked, conscious of our place, of the fact that we were on the ship that had so many times delivered us to our destruction, hers and mine. "I'll tell you about it another time."

Another time.

I thought of Lorian.

Had that much—at least—been truth? Had he betrayed me? Struck his bargain to deliver the Norman Stars into his hands? Lorian had changed, but

I could not believe that he had changed so much as that. Lorian had never wanted *power*. The man had the heart of knight, not a conqueror. But if he believed he might do some good? Maybe. But no. There was no treason in Lorian's heart.

And Edouard? No. Now I knew that circling nightmare for what it had been, I knew and could hardly believe I had believed it. Had I not seen what I had seen with my own eyes, I would never have believed any of it.

"The weapon works . . ." I breathed, eager to wrench myself from those memories. "*Voidmaker*. I killed . . . some of them."

"Some of—" She pulled away, looked at me with eyes wide and terrified. "There were more—"

"Dozens," I said. "All dead, but for the two."

"Dozens?" She had removed her armor, same as I, was clad only in her black underlayment. She looked shrunken, her face shining in the low light. "The Prophet . . . ?"

I knew she was remembering Danu. "I don't know," I told her. "It's possible it escaped." Ushara had escaped, after all.

"But you think the Prophet himself is dead?" she asked. "Or do you think it succeeded? That it became a part of that . . . thing?"

How could I answer her? I looked out the window, as if to count the unknown stars. Finally I said, "The . . . body is no more."

I had not told her how Miudanar had put on another, how he—or Syriani, in its caprice, if some part of the Prophet yet lived—had donned my own face, just as I had not told her of Ushara's final torment, the vision of Cassandra possessed.

We stood then a long while, neither of us moving, nor speaking, nor trying to speak.

When I could bear the silence no longer, I said, "Thank you"—at once it was I who could not turn and face her—"for coming to find me . . . again." The silence on the air between us was a tangible thing. "How did you find me?"

"I knew you were coming here," she said. The ice in her voice cracked. "I knew where to look." When I kept staring, she said, "*Mistwalker* picked

up your transmission—when you signaled Orphan. Aristedes relayed your location to us here.”

“Lorian?” My heart sank. Had I not escaped Ushara’s labyrinth after all? “Where is he now?”

“Roundtable Fleet just broke Ywain orbit,” Cassandra said. “Right ahead of us.”

“Is that where we’re going?” I asked, and felt a growing sense of dread.

She swallowed, nodded. “Rendezvous with *Mistwalker* in just under thirty minutes.”

“*Correction*,” said the ship’s daimon, “*rendezvous with the target is currently estimated for twenty-seven minutes, thirty-nine seconds.*”

Cassandra arched her eyebrows.

I touched my sword. If Lorian had indeed betrayed me—if Edouard was compromised . . . it didn’t need thinking about. I had *seen* it all.

“Abba, what is wrong?” Cassandra asked. “There’s something you’re not saying.”

I looked at her, could see only the hole in her forehead. Her crimson halo. “The Watchers, ah . . .” I shook my head. “They showed me visions. Lorian betrayed us. And Edouard—”

“*Allanat!* Edouard? It is *not* possible. You know him better than that.” She peered up at me, as if lifting my face. “And Lorian? I do not believe it.”

“Just put your shield up . . . when we get where we’re going,” I said, brushing past her to look out the window. “The Cielcin haven’t spotted us?”

“*Non*,” said she. It felt better with her beside me than before me, shoulder to shoulder. “The daimon . . . it says they can’t.”

I turned my back upon the window then, made my careful way to the chamber’s only chair. “Good enough,” I said, sinking into the captain’s seat. The frigate’s heat sinks and sleek design served to make it more difficult to detect, I knew. I prayed the vessel’s daimon would be proven right.

“Did you really kill them?” I could sense the brittleness in Cassandra’s voice. “The Watchers?”

I held her gaze.

“Is she—”

“Wounded.” I shook my head. “She was the one who destroyed *Voidmaker*.”

Cassandra’s face fell, and I felt a twinge of pain. “Where is she?” I saw her fingers white about her unkindled sword.

“I don’t know.”

“*Alert*,” the ship’s daimon interjected. “*Incoming transmission . . .*” It recited a call code. “*Mistwalker*.”

It was time to face what was coming. The signal was audio only, possessed only the barest delays—we were hurtling toward his vessel, after all, though it was as yet invisible in the night ahead.

“*Is he awake?*” The Supreme Commandant’s voice was sharp as highmatter.

“Yes, Lorian,” I said. “I’m here.”

“*Hadrian . . .*” His voice was strained. “*That thing . . . above the worldship. What is it?*”

I sensed no duplicity in him. “One of my weapons. It—one of the Watchers destroyed it.”

“*That’s a weapon?*” Lorian sounded aghast. “*It’s like a . . . battle station. Where did it come from? What is it?*”

“A god-killer,” I said, and quickly explained what it was and what had happened. “When it was destroyed, everything that was . . . *folded up*, let’s say, inside it . . . everything spilled out.”

Lorian was silent on the other side. I had just upset his most basic assumptions about physics and the nature of ultimate reality.

“*So this weapon is destroyed?*” I could almost see him setting the deaths of his men aside, like a chess player setting a discarded piece beside the game board. There would be time for anger later, and for mourning.

“Yes.”

“*What else do you have?*”

If he *was* compromised, revealing *Astrophage*’s existence would risk all. But if he was *not* compromised, if he was still my friend . . .

I needed him. With Olorin dead, and the fleet scattered, Lorian was my

last, best ally. My only ally. Or I was alone. I glanced at Cassandra, mind racing.

"You have some plan, surely," Lorian said. *"You wouldn't have massed the fleet like this for nothing. You're no grand strategist, Hadrian, but you're no fool. I know you're up to something. Now, out with it!"*

Cassandra nodded, just once.

I made my choice.

". . . it's called the Sun Eater."

"The what?" Too clearly I could see Lorian's eyes narrow, his posture straighten.

"The weapon is designed to create a singularity from very little mass," I said, *"and to sustain it long enough for it to stabilize."*

"That's impossible," said Lorian. *"The Hawking radiation. The hole would evaporate immediately. You can't feed a singularity that small fast enough before it collapses. The heat required—"*

"You can," I said. *"The weapon injects the black hole into the target star, Lorian. Once there, it—"*

"Core collapse," came the Supreme Commandant's interjection. *"Supernova."*

I held Cassandra's gaze a long moment. *"Yes."*

"You could destroy their fleet with a single shot."

"Yes."

A pause. *"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"*

"I couldn't," I said. *"The Chantry . . . Lorian, you weren't here. What they did . . ."*

"Damn the Chantry to the eighth, last hell!" Lorian cursed, and my heart lifted. *"But it doesn't matter."*

"Lorian . . ." I choked. The vehemence in his tone—the relief.

"I said it doesn't matter, Hadrian," said he.

"Only the Emperor knows," I said. *"The Emperor. And you."*

"Made the list, then, did I?" Lorian almost snarled, bristling. *"I'm touched."*

The distance between us almost made a sound, a yawning, whistling

howl, as of wind through jagged rocks. “We can end the war today,” I said.

He was still the man I knew.

“*Then we must.*” Another pause. “*The girl said you slew Dorayaica.*”

I looked at Cassandra, saw her flicker of irritation at the impersonal reference. “The beast is dead,” I said, and saw again the black god’s fingers snaking from the top of the Prophet’s shattered skull.

The Supreme Commandant of Roundtable Fleet was silent then.

It was the Commander of the Red Company who answered. “*Then it’s done,*” he said. “*Our ghosts can rest.*”

A light shone from outside, as if in answer—or in challenge. Not the white of matter-antimatter annihilation, but a deep, terrible red.

It did not fade, as the light from any blast, but grew in intensity.

“What is that?” Cassandra asked.

Ramanthanu and Otomno chose that moment to appear. I could only shake my head. My daughter went to the window, the better to see what she could see.

“*Report,*” spoke the daimon, “*unidentified object emerging from the far side of the planet, bearing—*” The rest became a meaningless string of numbers.

“*What the hell is that thing?*” Lorian’s voice was shaken.

“What thing?” I asked.

But I knew the answer.

In the moment that followed, a hideous sound went up, went through all creation. A roar as of ten thousand throats raw with screaming, as of a terrible, fanged beast at bay . . . a noise like the ringing of innumerable clangoring bells.

The battle cry of the Watchers.

Above the limn of Ywain, a new sun was rising. Red and gold it was, and it was coming, speeding toward us. Almost cousin to *Albedo* it seemed, a blazing star.

“Take evasive action!” I shouted, more for Lorian’s benefit than for our own.

The image on the screen attenuated, stretched, became a stream of fire

racing cross the heavens, like a great, red dragon.

A serpent.

Seeing it I knew—and felt with that sense other than sight—that Ushara had not escaped the destruction of the Dhar-Iagon alone.

Miudanar himself had come.

A black dread fell on me then, and I sat hunched in that room's one solitary chair. My surrender to Hushansa, my confrontation with the Prophet, my combat with Ushara on the worldship's frozen surface . . . all of it amounted to little more than borrowed time.

"Can we jump to warp?" I asked.

The daimon's coolly masculine voice answered me. "*Affirmative.*"

"Lorian," I said, speaking fast, "do not engage. I repeat: do *not* engage. Get your people clear of Ywain. Make for Cynon. The Emperor's atomics will give us a fighting chance against that thing. We just need to buy enough time!"

My friend's voice came taut over the transmission. "*Where are you going?*"

I looked at Cassandra, at my two Pale companions. "Straight to the Emperor," I said. "Someone has to warn him. We can be at Cynon in seconds. You need to preserve your warp capability for the trip out of here."

"Where is it going?" Cassandra asked, peering at the then-static image of the Watcher.

Not even the ship had an answer.

"It has seen us?" asked Ramanathanu, ducking its head.

"Not yet," I said. Almost I could feel the heat of the vile thing burning, burning out there in the dark. It would be on us in moments. How I longed to disappear, recalling the terror of his face—*my* face—and of his hands on Syriani's neck. I shut my eyes, prayed the beast would pass us by.

Not now, I whispered in the silence of my heart. *Not here. Not yet.*

"*We have atomics,*" Lorian said. "*A sustained electromagnetic pulse is supposed to be able to kill them, yes?*"

Not yet.

"*Hadrian!*"

“Yes!” I said. “But if you miss, it’ll be on you!”

I could almost see the little man’s feral smile floating on the air before me. “*I won’t miss.*”

“Lorian—” *Mistwalker* was exposed. The Roundtable Fleet—what remained of it—was strung out across ten thousand miles of open space.

“Just go!” he said. “You’re in my way!”

“Lorian . . .”

“Damn it, what?” said the Supreme Commandant.

“Don’t die.”

“If you don’t go, I’ll knock your ship dead and drag you to Cynon myself!”

“Daimon!” I said. “Take us to Cynon.”

“*Affirmative.*”

The ship whined beneath us as the warp array spun, projectors firing. In the instant before the stars distorted, I saw the Watcher stream overhead, like a living comet, whole body undulating, the oriflamme of the god it had betrayed.

It was beautiful, glorious in majesty.

Burning bright.

Stars stretched, and the beast itself was changed, pulled until red became blue, blue violet. Then it was gone, vanished in an instant. In another instant, Cynon was glaring at us, pockmarked, lifeless, cold. She was surrounded, her four moons joined by countless others, each with craters gleaming with the light of cities and of guns.

“Signal *Aurora*,” I said, massaging my injured shoulder. “Request permission to board.”

“*Affirmative*,” said the daimon. “*Message dispatched.*”

Wearily then, I stood, turning to look back in the direction of the outer solar system. Ywain was about thirty light-minutes away. It would be thirty minutes before the light of Lorian’s attack on Miudanar could reach us, before Miudanar himself became visible.

“Telegraph *Demiurge*.” I adjusted the drape of the *mandyas* where it

secured my arm. "I want to know how long we have before preparations are complete."

Astrophage had a prolonged firing sequence.

It was no small thing, to destroy a star.

"Can he kill it?" asked Cassandra.

"You remember Sabratha," I said. "I'm starting to think these things can't be killed."

Her face darkened. "What if this doesn't work?"

I held her gaze in silence then, a long moment.

"It must work," said a brusque, halting voice. Ramanthanu stepped forward, head bowed to keep its horns from scraping against the low ceiling. "My prince's orders come from Utannash himself, and Utannash is greater than the gods of my fathers. I have seen it." It loomed over her, membranes flicking over its featureless black eyes. "You have seen what is to come—and still you doubt?"

Cassandra snarled, stepped toward the towering xenobite. "You don't know what I've seen, *creature*," said she. "You think I've forgotten what you are? Don't talk to me about doubts. I have *plenty* about *you*."

"Enough!" I stamped my foot for silence. "Ramanthanu is right. The Emperor told me his people killed one of their kind on Nairi, so it must be possible. But if all we succeed in doing is breaking the Cielcin fleet for good and all . . ." Here I looked the captain in the face, with no small measure of pity. "I call that good."

If my words stung my servant, it did not betray its hurt, instead looked at me, impassive.

"Unidentified craft, this is Imperial Battleship Aurora. Lord Marlowe, Lord-Captain Rice hereby grants request to board." The transmission filled all the air of the bridge. *"Hold your course and prepare for intercept."*

"Are you taking fire, Lieutenant?" I asked, guessing the man's rank.

"Negative, my lord," came the Martian reply, *"we gutted their van here like the inferior beings they are. Arsenal laid their worldships flat. Lord Kosis, he says they meant to shatter Cynon the way they did Gododdin, but we put a stop to it."*

A wave of fresh relief washed over me as we fell into a stable orbit round that desolation of a world, the four of us standing in uneasy silence.

“I am delighted to hear it.”

“*Alert,*” the daimon said, “*message received. Point of origin: Starship Demiurge. Message as follows . . .*”

The air turned almost to amber, to crystal as I hung on the next words.

Orphan’s words. The words I had been waiting all my life to hear.

“*The weapon is primed.*”

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CHAPTER 78

KILLING THE DRAGON

“LORD SHADOW, SIR.” THE Martian who greeted us in the landing bay might have been cast from the archetypal mold: the lanky, elongated build; the heavy muscle; the face hairless and scarred. “Welcome aboard.”

It was the voice that recalled his name to me. “Thank you, Commander Gannon.”

Gannon relaxed his salute, marked my arm and the ragged nature of my kit. “Are you well, sir?”

“Old wounds, Commander,” I said. “I will heal.”

A small contingent of the Martian Guard stood just behind the commander, a dozen men in all, four triases—all helmed, high-crested—ready to escort us . . . where? To the bridge? To the Emperor? “If I may ask, lord,” Gannon ventured, “why are you here?”

“Why am I not at my post?” I let him hear the insubordination in his tone.

Gannon averted his eyes even more, stammered some apology.

I raised my good, right hand to silence him, and spoke the truth the man—and all men—needed most to hear. “Syriani Dorayaica is dead.”

The commander recoiled, face working through an avalanche of feeling. Shock. Joy. Relief. Disbelief. The men behind him stirred.

“Dead?” Gannon said, looking from Cassandra to myself and back again. “Truly?”

“Upon my word,” said I, hand to breast. “I must speak with the Emperor at once.”

Gannon nodded. “Word was sent to Lord Nicephorus. His Radiance was resting. They are working to rouse him now . . .” He looked back at his subordinates. “We have orders to escort you to the bridge. Lord Captain

Rice has asked that you give your report to him. The Emperor may be some time yet.”

Something in the man’s voice—his *hesitation*, maybe—cast a shadow black upon my heart. “Has his condition worsened?”

“Worsened?” Gannon made a warding gesture. “I’d not say that, sir. Only the strain of the fighting . . .” His training asserted itself. “Mars is weary from his labors.”

War itself is weary.

“Fix your heart, soldier,” I said. “This day will see us make an end to all.”

Gannon stiffened. “Yes, my lord.” His eyes went to Cassandra. “Is it just the two of you?”

A brief *ah* escaped my lips. “There are two others.” I had thus far managed to conceal the existence of Ramanthanu and its countrymen from the broader Imperium.

“Let them come,” Gannon said, pivoting to one side. “We waste time.”

I hesitated. “Order your men to stand down.”

Gannon looked at me askance. “What’s all this?”

I shut my eyes, allowed myself one long, racking breath, said, “*Ramanthanu-kih! Otomno-kih! Yelnnaa!*”

Every Martian hand flew to arms. Highmatter lances flared to life, rifles lurched to readiness. Gannon himself put his hand on his sidearm—a needler identical to the one Lorian had used to shoot me when I returned upon *Mistwalker*.

“Hold!” I said, and it was the voice of the Lord Commandant of the Red Company that sprang from my lips.

They held.

Gannon’s pistol aimed from his hip, might have been pointed at myself. “What is the meaning of this?”

“They’re mine!” I said, hand still thrust out.

“They’re Cielcin!” Gannon said.

“I said *stand down*, Commander!”

Ramanthanu and its mate reached the bottom of the ramp and sank to

their knees. Still Ramanthanu was near so tall as I, and its crown rose above my head.

The gesture had the intended effect, and Gannon's men relaxed.

"Only two?" the commander asked.

Ramanthanu answered him itself, speaking in its stilted, halting way, "We serve the Marlowe. Have served."

The Martians recoiled, shocked to hear the speech of men in the mouth of my loyal monster, and Gannon—still holding his needler primed at his hip—exclaimed: "It speaks!"

"They have been with me for many decades," I said. "Now stand down."

Gannon looked at the two kneeling xenobites. "They are armed?"

"We are not," said Ramanthanu.

The Martian commander ruminated on his choices. "Very well," he said. "But their hands will be bound."

"You do not have the authority. *I* am Auctor of the Imperium, *Commander*, not you."

But the Martian was undaunted. "My lord, these are *Cielcin*."

"We will do it," Ramanthanu said, and raised its slender arms. "We will do as I say."

Otomno followed its master's lead, and raised its hands for the binding.

"Abba . . ." Cassandra touched my arm.

"Very well," I said. "But you will give me the control that unlocks their manacles. You may consider them *my* prisoners." I glowered at the Martian. "Will that suffice?"

Gannon hesitated for only a moment. "Very well. I will take you to the captain and Sir Gray."

• • •

Aurora's ready room was a long, narrow chamber situated just off the bridge. Numerous tall, slitted windows ran along the outer wall, displaying a view out over the hull, where the countless turrets and ramparts of the

flagship shone like a city of brass and black stone. In place of the windows on the wall opposite, the Imperial banner hung in duplicate, red and white.

“Then we have lost Roundtable Fleet as well,” said Lord Captain Adar Rice when I had finished my account of all that had passed with me since the battle began. He sat with his helmet tipped back atop his head, like the image of some Athenian marble, his weathered face worn with care.

“We don’t know that,” I said. “We’ve had no word. But Lorian Aristedes is the most capable officer I have ever known. If anyone could survive direct engagement with one of the Watchers—”

“The intus? He has brass, I’ll give him that. But you saw what that *thing* did to our fleet . . .” He fell silent a moment. “I doubt even those Extrasolarian behemoths could last long against those creatures . . .”

The atmosphere about the table then was like that of a wake: somber, tense, with each expecting the other to be the one to speak.

“How long before they can reach us here?” asked Amon Kosis.

I looked at him. The Martian legate looked exhausted, the ghost of his former self.

“They can be here at any time,” I said.

“We should telegraph *Mistwalker* immediately,” said Kosis, looking to Gannon and Rice.

All agreed this was sense, and Rice dispatched his adjutant.

“How are we to kill these things?” asked Captain Adar Rice. “If even these . . . Mericanii weapons of yours are insufficient to the task?”

I did not dare tell him about *Astrophage*. That was a matter for the Emperor’s ears, and the Emperor’s ears alone. Orphan’s warning echoed in my mind.

“The weapons *can* kill them,” I said.

“But you said yourself that they have failed!” Rice argued, hands splayed on the table.

This must be.

The Quiet’s words resonated in my skull, accompanied by the image of all that light. They would fail—all would fail—unless it was what I was commanded to do. On Danu, I had tried to avoid the coming fire, had sailed

there with the intention of deploying *Voidmaker* against the enemy. I had not even gotten the chance to fire a shot. Cassandra had prevented me. Cassandra, and Fate. When I had carried Edouard's pocket telegraph into the heart of Dharan-Tun, it had not been with the hope of destroying my enemies—only with the hope of distracting them.

That much had worked.

Ushara was wounded. Dorayaica destroyed.

"We draw near the end," I said. "It is very nearly over."

"Aye," said Amon Kosis. "But will it mean our end or theirs?"

"The atomics will damage them," I said. "Even if they won't destroy them. We can stop them here. Slow them down."

Adar Rice chewed his tongue, sat back. Almost I feared his Corinthian helmet would tumble from his shaven head. "You're sure of that?"

"We've seen it," said Cassandra. "At Sabratha."

"Intense bursts of radiation can cause the substance of the creatures' flesh to crystallize," I said. "Even brief exposure can cause severe damage." I looked from one Martian to the next. "The Emperor's arsenal should be sufficient to hold the beast at bay."

"But for how long?" asked the captain. "And to what purpose? It is victory we need, not a long defeat! These weapons of yours . . . you promised us victory, Lord Marlowe!"

Vwaa! Vwaa!

A red light filled the room then, pulsing, bathing everyone in light like blood. I lurched to my feet, searching the faces of the officers before me for an answer. Rice and the others had found their feet as well, and the Lord Captain tugged his helmet down over his coifed head.

"What happens?" asked Ramanathanu, looking to me.

Aurora shook beneath my feet, shields struck by weapons fire.

"We're under attack," said Gannon.

"What was that?" Cassandra asked.

As if in answer, the door to the bridge dilated, and a Martian officer entered. "Lord Captain, Supreme Legate, sirs! It's the Pale!"

"More of them?" said Amon Kosis, face downturned. "New arrivals?"

“Unclear, sir,” said the junior man. “They just *appeared*, sir. In and around Cynon local space. Hit us all at once.”

I had moved to the windows, was peering out into the night. I could see nothing to clear the fog of war. “I see no worldships.”

But the way the deck quaked beneath our feet was unmistakable, and I followed the high officers out through the portal and onto the bridge itself, where countless officers in Martian red or the black livery of the armada stood, or moved, or sat at consoles. The mighty space yawned to greet us after the narrow confines of the ready room.

So like the bridge of *Tamerlane* it was in shape and layout, with the holography well at the center before the captain’s seat, and the main catwalk overlooking the banks of junior men seated in the pits below. As upon *Tamerlane*, the forward wall was dominated by a single, large window. On *Tamerlane*, that window had been false, had instead been a screen designed to give the appearance of a window. On *Aurora*, it was a window in truth, a sheet of aluminum glass three hundred cubits wide, thirty high, and more than two cubits in thickness. Where on *Tamerlane* the bridge had been built far to the fore, upon *Aurora* it was reversed, so that the bridge sat high in the rear castle, on the ziggurat overlooking the dorsal hull. The whole expanse of the Imperial flagship ran away before us, an unrolled carpet of black and gold.

“Multiple incoming targets!” said one, hands flickering at his controls. “Class-3! Class-4!”

The Cielcin had sent smaller ships against us, vessels little larger than *Ascalon*. I could see them sparkling on the holograph before the captain’s chair: a shimmering light, like a shoal of countless little fish.

“Alert! Alert! This is the *Erebus*. We are taking heavy fire—”

Reports began issuing in over the comm console.

“This is *Pride of Hellas*. We’ve taken on boarders!”

“—came out of nowhere!”

“—must have been cloaked—”

“—our shields are compromised! We’re reliant on lightercraft for defense. Request immediate aid!”

“How did we miss this?” asked Amon Kosis. “Where did they come from?”

“They just appeared, lord,” said a lieutenant at the tactical station.

“What do you mean they *just appeared*?” demanded the Supreme Legate.

I advanced upon the holograph display, which showed Cynon, its four moons, and the disposition of the fleet in and around them each. Nearly all our vessels orbited the planet itself, below the order of the first moon, but there were a certain number stationed higher up: about each moon or beyond them. The wreck of the Cielcin vanguard, mostly, had fallen in between the orbits of the four moons, and one worldship at least had struck the third moon—though it was much smaller and less dense than the natural satellite, and the moon remained, seemingly unperturbed.

The new arrivals had appeared in our midst, apart from the wreck of the van, inside the orbit of that first moon. As I watched, another set of lights simply *appeared* amid the others.

“Where are their warp wakes?” asked Adar Rice.

“Are they cloaked?” asked Commander Gannon.

“My lord!” came a woman’s voice. I found her, standing tall in the pit below, her face turned up toward us. “We’ve had word from *Honor*. They have eyes on the enemy. Captain Weber says the enemy just *appeared*.”

Lord Captain Rice turned his helmed head on me as once more the ship rocked. “What is this?”

I gripped the rail of the holography well with my good right hand. “I’ve never seen this.”

“They’re deploying boarding craft!”

“Scramble the lighters!” Rice was shouting. “It doesn’t matter where they’re coming from! Cut them down!”

But it did matter. I peeled myself away from the center console, proceeded—as I had ten thousand times upon *Tamerlane*—along the narrow way above the pits to either side where the hard work of operating the Imperial flagship was being done. I advanced toward the window.

“Ask them!”

The words came before I had made it even halfway, and I halted. Something in that voice—was it Rice who had spoken? Or Kosis? Or Gannon?—pulled at me.

I knew he had meant the Cielcin. My Cielcin, who were Cielcin no more.

The men nearest the two of them had turned, hands on shield packs. On stunners. On knives. The Pale stood shoulder to shoulder, marked by the red cloth of their kerchiefs and armbands—tokens none of their kind would choose to wear.

“They have nothing to do with this!” I snarled.

“*Ba-Aeta-doh ne?*” asked Otomno, and I sensed a vibration in its tone close kin to human fear.

“Leave them!” I said. “They have been in my service for *decades*, Legate! They have no intelligence to offer you!”

Aurora shook as her shields endured the impact of distant guns. In the pits below, officers were still shouting their reports.

“They must know something!” said Amon Kosis.

“Lord Kosis!” Commander Gannon interjected. “Look, sir, on the display.”

The Imperial fleet shone pale blue on the holograph, with allied vessels in shades of green and yellow, and the Cielcin ships in red. *Aurora*’s sensors sent out waves many times a second, so that the model of space around us unfolded in as near to real time as the human mind could ask for. With every moment that passed, more lights appeared—like motes of dust—multiplying as cells in a culture. They appeared everywhere at once. In orbit about Cynon. About its moons. About the wreckage of the Cielcin vanguard.

Wherever man still stood.

“What is this . . . ?” Amon Kosis’s words were like the last leaves of autumn, blown from the tree at last by winter’s breath.

“—must be thousands of them,” came one fragmentary report on the comm.

“Where are they coming from?” asked Captain Rice, bent over the

console.

“This is the Imperial Service Vessel *Phobos* reporting.” The voice was that of some Martian high officer, clipped and precise. “We’ve lost primary sublight engines to sappers. Security has yet to eradicate the intruders.” Too well I could picture the Cielcin boarding craft limpeting to the human vessel’s outer hull, cutting, burning its way inside.

“—sustained heavy damage.”

“—our sublight drives are inoperable. We’re losing altitude. Request immediate assistance. Repeat, this is Imperial Service Vessel—”

I clenched my jaw, listened to the reports coming in with a sense of growing dread. It had to be the Watchers’ doing. They must have done something to move the smaller vessels, to bring them to us from across the system at great speed. Surely, they had that power . . .

“This is Strategos Bassander Lin of *Tempest* reporting,” came the familiar voice, and my heart at least was buoyed by the fact of my old rival’s survival. “*Aurora*, we are taking heavy fire! These ships! They came from nowhere!”

“How is this happening?” asked Adar Rice, gripping the rim of the main console. “Marlowe?”

I shook my head, made a gesture to Cassandra to stay by Ramanthanu and Otomno—for the moment forgotten. “I don’t know,” I said, and winced, pulling the long officer’s coat I’d been given over my injured shoulder.

Captain Rice was shouting orders over the rail and into the pits, while Amon Kosis relayed commands across what remained of his fleet.

“Is there word from the Emperor?” I asked, turning to Commander Gannon.

The man only shook his head.

I resumed my careful progress along the forward catwalk, coat hanging from my shoulders like a cape.

I reached the high window, peered out over the void. I knew I would see but little. The Cielcin ships that were appearing were not the worldships, but the smaller attack vessels, of which the largest were less than a mile from end to end. They would have had to come very close indeed for me to

see anything, unless it was the light of their engines. But I could see a number of our own ships, shining black and gold in the darkness, illuminated by deck lights and the icy glow of ion engines. I saw a flash, a cloud of red, of fire snuffed out by the void. White lightning without thunder. Then nothing.

“*Phobos* is . . . *Phobos* is gone!”

I bowed my head in silent prayer.

“Where are they coming from?”

“*Erebus* was just hit!”

“—lost all power to primary shields!”

“—confirming destruction of the target—”

I kept my back on the bridge, shoulders square against the glass. I stood alone in the forward position, but for the worthies at the navigation consoles. The windows tipped ever so slightly back as they ascended, following the slope of the ship’s rear castle, so that space above us seemed to open outward. The dorsal hull lay stretched, a hundred decks or more below. I saw gun turrets on the surface turning, tracking targets too far and small and fast for my eyes. *Aurora* shook with the distant report of those guns.

A fresh alarum sounded, sharp and loud in my ears.

“Unidentified object!” said the chief navigator near at hand. “Bearing zero-zero-zero!”

That was directly before us and dead ahead. I craned my neck, hoping to see.

“What on Earth is that?” asked one of the junior navigators, looking at his instrumentation.

A light had opened in the space above *Aurora*, between the flagship and the planet Cynon. We had rotated as we flew, so that our dorsal hull faced the planet, and Cynon hung in the void above us, a blind glass eye of a world. The light that flooded the vacuum outside seemed almost to come from it, but that could not be. Nothing on Cynon could make such a light as that, not even the fortress at *Nemec Patera*.

“I don’t understand these readings!” said the chief navigator.

Something was emerging in the space above us, descending from the space beyond time.

I felt his presence before I saw it. The malice and delight, and looking up, I saw a shadow moving in that brightness, and knew the thing for what it was.

A great, shaggy head.

The head of Miudanar. His shoulders. Arms. Hands.

A giant figure shone in the night above us, large almost as *Aurora* itself. Its hide was pale, faintly luminous against the stars. It floated toward us, massive arms outstretched. One six-fingered hand seized one of our battleships—a vessel miles long—and crushed it in its fist.

The men of *Aurora* all about me forgot that they were soldiers. They forgot that they were men—that they were living at all. They were still as stone in that instant, each rooted to his spot. Even Cassandra was still, and Ramanthanu and Otomno both beside her.

It was impossible. Absurd.

The maddest thing in all man's history.

A giant naked among the stars, its flesh milk pale—glistening with starlight.

My mind raced back to Akterumu, to the mural the Vaiartu had left there, carved in jadeite and left in the crystal skull of that same beast's prior incarnation. The Enar had depicted Miudanar as a serpent wound about the stars, his countless grasping hands crushing whole planets in shining fingers. But the titan that stretched its jeweled limbs across the heavens then was no serpent, no dragon with countless arms.

It was a man.

I felt his will and vision seize on me, and a moment later that face turned and looked straight at me.

It was my own face.

Whole galaxies shone in those eyes, dark and distant. I felt his hatred like a wave breaking about the room, and for a moment I was sure I would be washed away. I felt the bridge slipping away, saw the room grow pale and specter-thin.

But I raised one foot, brought it down *hard* upon the deck.

I would *not* be taken.

“Here I am,” I said, speaking softly, hardly to be heard.

“Is that . . . Lord Marlowe?”

“Why does it look like Lord Marlowe?”

To destroy me, I thought, understanding the Dreamer’s game.

“Open fire!” The voice that rang out over my shoulder was that of Lord Captain Rice. The redoubtable old Martian struck his empty palm with a baton. All about us, the men struggled to remaster themselves, to seize control of their wits and wills in the face of insanity and horror. “Prepare primary dorsal missile batteries! Target the creature! Target the creature!”

“Aye, Captain!” came the roar from the tactical station.

Aurora shook with the report of its own guns, and in the hull before and below me, countless hatches opened, and countless rockets flared into the night. They were the missiles from Cynon, I knew. Weapons from man’s last heroic age, remnants of the Empire of Earth and Sun.

The first of the warheads detonated, and the view out the window grew dark as the glass polarized. Still I shielded my eyes as the rain of fire began.

“Contact!” said one of the tac officers. “Contact! Contact!”

The bombs left a cloud of glowing particulates that shrouded the titan from view. I could see nothing of the giant itself through the gleaming orange haze, and—for a moment—even the instruments were blind.

“Did we destroy it?” asked Amon Kosis.

No. The answer came from deep within my soul well before any instrument could confirm it.

I saw the *hand* come down toward us even as the tac officer announced the failure of the atomics. The flesh of that hand gleamed—no longer white, but mottled black and silver, so that the light of stars shone through it and from within it. The blow would have shattered *Aurora* like glass, smashed the vessel to kindling.

Nothing could stop it.

Nothing in creation.

Nothing . . . but me.

The arm and mighty fist struck *Aurora* then. Struck it, but did not touch it. Miudanar's arm passed through the mighty vessel—both hit and did not hit it. My own hand was raised, palm pressed flat against the window glass. My mortal eyes met the eyes of the god beyond—my own dark reflection. For a moment, we were in two places at once—Miudanar and *Aurora*. In one place, our ship was atoms, blown to pieces by the giant's hand. In the other, *Aurora* endured, preserved from destruction.

The air about me sparked with electricity, and I felt my hair lifted from my shoulders. I saw it standing half on end, reflected in the window glass. I heard the shouts of the men behind me, the reports of men from the lower decks come streaming over the comm, while all the while the alarms were ringing, and consoles blatted out their warnings.

"He's in league with it!" said one Martian voice.

"It's him!"

"Back away!" That was Cassandra. "I'll kill you if you touch him!"

My eyes were locked on those of the giant outside, my hand held out as its own. Thus we stood for what seemed all time, locked in mortal combat—though neither of us seemed to move. It was in will we struggled, each against the other.

To create is to choose. So the Quiet had told me, on Annica long ago. Thus *to choose is to create*, so that with every action we might remake the world, or make a better one. Miudanar beheld a world with *Aurora* destroyed, and reaching out his hand, he had seized it, just as I had seized another, a world in which he was not—or was not there. We existed then in a state of superposition, both visions for the world in place.

I could not fail. *Must* not fail.

Cri dridax.

Yūek er wered.

Tanyr . . .

Tanyr!

Nessabaun!

You will fail!

You will fail, Kinsman!

Kinsman.

The ship around me grew faint, walls and floor sliding out of focus, as when I had crossed the void from *Demiurge* to *Aurora*. I felt my feet sinking, swallowed up by the deck, as though the steel were water rising about my knees. Once more I raised my foot, once more stepped up, *back* onto the surface of the bridge.

A searing pain flared behind my eyes, and a wave of nausea gripped me. I could feel his fingers forcing their way deeper, deeper, deeper into my mind. I was standing in the porphyry chamber—a boy of seven, Crispin beside me. We had crept in to see the body of our grandmother, the Lady Fuchsia, whom Time destroyed. I had lifted the shroud that covered her face, saw the sutures that held shut her emptied eye sockets. There was Kyra, weeping, rooted to the spot, and the pain where Father's ring laid open my face, just like the Prophet's own claws.

Muddy water closed over Cat's poor face, and blood soaked my shoes in the coliseum hypogeum. I saw the light leave Gilliam's mismatched eyes—recalled the mismatched eyes of the boy in the Dhar-Iagon.

"Am I a good man?" I asked, felt Valka's arms around me.

But Valka was dead.

Sorrow, too, might slay me. The world was slipping away beneath my feet.

Let it end, came the whisper. *Let it all end*.

The voice was my own—was *not* my own.

Ghen lay dead in a pool of his own blood, destroyed by the Painted Man's maidservants. Switch looked at me, rage, shame, confusion warring in his honest face. I saw him hanging from a tree, his red hair touched with white, and wept, but did not take my eyes from those eyes watching in the night.

I hadn't known.

He will not save you . . . said Syriani-Miudanar. *Not you*.

Augustin Bourbon died in a flash of fire, consumed by my revenge. Nobuta Otiolo bled blackly at my feet.

Not you.

The ground was hard beneath my feet. Solid steel again.

It was cold in the old city, far from where the diggers had carved the newest channels, and there was very little food. I was starving and went on hands and knees through all the narrow places, sucking meat off bones.

But not all of it—never all.

Always I would wrap what refuse I could find in rags, and carry the bundle back to the water in my teeth, to the place above the poisoned water, where we were safe at least. That was where I hid her who had brought me into being.

“Why do you feed me?” The question scratched at me. “It is *you* who must eat.”

“I eat enough.”

It was never true.

“Yama . . .” She always argued. She didn’t understand. Without her, I had nothing. It did not matter that she had no legs, that she had lost them with her arm in the fight that had brought her to the poisoned water. She was my world. All of it.

Yama.

I felt a rush of fury, of sorrow and triumph both. *Yama* was *egg* in the tongue of Se Vattayu.

Yama.

Something broke, and I took a step forward. I was in a dark place, a cavern of black stone, while all about me a pale light lingered, illuminating rocks rudely carved with crooked circles, shapes wrought in imitation of the marks of *his* hand.

He had been here. Even *here*.

Was there nowhere safe? Nowhere far enough?

Splash.

Something was paddling in the water at my feet, and looking down I saw a small, misshapen creature, a thing of living clay. It looked up at me, surprise on its smooth, white face. The fruit of some mycelian structure grew on the wall of the cave, and reaching out I plucked one with my own darkly shining hand. Stooping, I offered it to the animal, seeing its potential.

It was small, but they all were, when measured against the vastness of the *all* that *he* had made.

There was enough energy hid in a single atom of hydrogen to start a planet burning.

There was more than enough in this creature to burn everything away.

Guileless then and unafraid, the creature stood, and took the food I offered it.

I would make its kind great.

A blow took me, and I felt the ground fail beneath my feet. I had lost focus then, for just a moment, tempted by the mysteries on offer. They were distractions. Objects in my path.

“Lord Marlowe!”

Die now!

Tel kures!

Wemma udantha wo!

She was where I had left her, propped against the wall of the abandoned tannery. Sheets of white manskin hung from spools above. Still the stench of rot and lime could be smelt upon the air, and the water I raised to my maker’s lips was bitter and oily.

“Let me die, little Yama,” she said.

“No.”

“Yama . . .”

“I said no!”

Her hand caught mine, stopped the cup and spilled water on her bare, much-bitten breast. It was all she had left to her—that hand. Even her teeth had fallen out and had not returned. “*Daqasa paqari wo, Yama-kih.*”

You have to eat.

“I eat enough.”

“Blood is not enough!”

I was hanging from the gates of the Dhar-Iagon, my shoulder torn, naked and humiliated, unable to move anymore. Urbaine stood on the ramparts, peered down with his hideous, half-human face. “I had her,” he said, mocking as ever, “in ways *you’ll* never understand.”

I could only hang there.

The Cielcin hemmed me in on either side, snarling, laughing, hurling their shit and rotten meat as I passed, hands bound, on gray sand. I was going to Akterumu, to be executed again. To be reborn. The children of the creature I had found by the water had become a great people. My people—not *his*.

I had taken them from him, as he had taken everything from me.

Everything.

Well I could remember all I'd lost. The world above. The world *before*.

Beyond.

Each of us had been made to a purpose, glorious and wonderful. My sister was made to shepherd the stars, to keep her flock in its place, and to tend them—that they might never die. She had been radiant in her beginning, her smile beautiful as her suns.

I was made for something else. Made to serve.

He had wrought me to guide his children, the ones that had come *before*. I saw them then, little things so like the crabs of Earth. They would be a great people. They would grow, and rise up, and mark the stars beyond their waters, and wonder. I was to teach them, to shepherd them as my sister shepherded the stars. I was a function, a spirit of evolution, of *becoming*. But to what end? Time itself was broken, had broken the instant the others spoke their descent, and in that instant—everything changed. They were meant to die, my people. The Vaiartu. Everything I'd been made to build, everything I'd been made *for* would be lost, undone by time, in time. This he called wisdom.

How black my fury then, and my despair.

Was that all I had been made to do? To shepherd a project doomed to fail before it had even begun? Could I watch them live and die? No. No. It was better to make an end, to make my own ending, to take what I could from creation before its end. I would take them for my own, save them if I could, and spirit them from this failed creation to one of my own making. I could do it. I knew the way. Or so I'd thought. And when I failed, I destroyed them myself.

Let it end.

Let it all end.

Orphan slid from its mother's womb, born in mud and blood. It bellowed at me, startled, scared to have been thrust into this life. Valka's clone fell to her knees at my feet. Cassandra's tongue lolled in the grip of Ushara's possession, and the part of me that was not me chuckled with delight to see his things brought low. The eyes of the Danuans shone livid white in the halls of my *Demiurge*, their faces red with the blood of their victims.

And Catraeth burned.

I hammered my fist against the window, felt the surface splash.

Miudanar's will was a dread weight, a titanic slab yoked to my shoulders.

I felt the black officer's coat fall to the floor.

"Daqasa paqari wo," my mother said, white hand upon my face.

I did not want to eat her.

She was all I had, had given me all I had.

But she was dying.

"It is the way of things," she said, and bared her throat, hand tightening in my hair. "Blood is not enough."

She was right. I knew that she was right.

She forced my face to her neck, as she had done a thousand times before. Always I had refused to bite. Refused to latch. Latched instead on some harder place, some safer place.

I was so hungry.

I bit.

Hot blood ran into my mouth, ran down my chin, my chest. Her hand never slackened, never let me go. Not even in death.

I wasn't hungry anymore.

But I was alone, and I was *Yama* no more—for who was I without *her*?

It is the way of things. Her words became my mantra.

But if such was the way of things . . . why then was my heart so troubled?

My own heart broke for the creature I was then, for little Yama. The egg had hatched, in the end, had given birth to horror. But poor Yama was dead, though it had not died with its mother, as it had believed. My heart moved with renewed pity. There is nothing evil in its beginnings. Not Dorayaica, nor its race. Not the Watchers themselves.

The Watchers . . .

I saw them then, as they were in their beginning: pure, refulgent, wrought of living light. I saw them . . . and I heard their song, a music like the sound of ten million voices woven together. From the highest heights to the deepest depths it ranged, filling creation, until every corner of the all shook with the joy of it. Each had brought himself—herself, whatever—to the song, each a living instrument.

I saw Miudanar, and Ushara beside him, and the others. I heard their singing, their part in the shaping and maintaining of creation. Ushara's smile was a thing shining to behold, not the stuff of nightmare, and the beauty of her radiance smote my heart with pity and wonder and great joy.

And I wept, felt the tears forming in my eyes even as I held the monster's gaze.

I understood a piece of what he'd lost, until I thought the pain of that loss would destroy me. The weight of his grief was like the weight of mountains, his rage like the sea, like the storms of Ywain, or the fire in the furnace heart of that system's star.

You made your choice. The thought came to me unbidden, and the shock of it freed my shoulders, and I stood up straight at last. "Your day is ended! Your time is done!"

I felt a shock go through creation, and reality—which had for a time contained a contradiction—collapsed as I made my choice. The waveform broke around us, became only matter.

Miudanar vanished. I was alone at the window, my hand pressed against the glass. My feet stood on solid ground, while about me the battle still raged.

But the giant was gone.

Gone.

I let my hand fall, my shoulders sag.

“He did it,” said one Martian voice.

“The Halfmortal, he—”

“Did he kill it?”

“How?”

“—got to be some trick. They’re in league, I tell you!”

“But it’s gone!”

“It had his face!”

“Not possible . . . it’s not possible!”

“Why did it have his face?”

“Abba?”

Cassandra had followed me halfway along the catwalk from the center console. “Has it gone?”

“Licking its wounds,” I said. “Like Ushara.”

“Where has it gone?” asked Captain Rice.

“Back into hyperspace,” I said.

“Hyperspace?” His reaction was the same as Lorian’s. “There’s no such thing.”

“There is,” I said, limping toward my daughter, who caught and steadied me. “I’m all right.”

She was looking at me, her face in shadows. “What is it?” she asked. She knew something was troubling me.

“Ask me later,” I said, and squeezed her hand. The memory of little Yama was like broken glass.

“What did you do to it?” asked Amon Kosis, drawing near behind Cassandra.

“I am weary,” I said, and realizing I owed the legate some manner of explanation, offered, “I tested my will against the creature and survived. But it is not beaten. I—” I swayed badly, my eyes bulging. “The human body is not made for this sort of thing . . .”

“I don’t understand this situation at all,” said Lord Captain Rice. “Kirke! Get him a chair!”

One of the Martians found a chair for me, and I sank into it. “Water,” I

said, and Cassandra left to fetch it. I gripped the arm of my chair. It was a Savonarola folding chair of the sort the Emperor himself favored, a thing of bloodwood set with mother-of-pearl.

“How do we fight that thing if it comes back?” asked the Martian Supreme Legate.

“You don’t!” I said sharply. “*When* that thing returns—not *if*, Lord Kosis. Not *if*. When it returns, you take this ship and you run, as fast as you are able. The Eternal City is gone. This ship is the closest thing to a capital the Empire has left.”

The man grew very pale indeed.

“Why did it look like you?” Captain Rice was peering down at me, terror and threat there mingled.

I looked up at him, unable to mask the welter of emotions in my heart. The tiredness. The pain. I smiled mirthlessly, said, “To hurt me.”

The battle was not yet over. Miudanar had hurled the ships at us through hyperspace, seemingly, had moved them from Ywain to Cynon with an act of will. But Miudanar had gone, and no new ships were arriving. Still, there were vessels enough, and *Aurora* shook with gunfire as Rice and his men shouted their orders.

It felt so far away.

Cassandra returned a moment later with the water, and I drank it down.

I sat there in unsteady silence then a good long while, ignoring questions from Gannon, from Kosis, from Rice. Ramanthanu and Otomno stood by me, their hands still chained.

“Lord Marlowe.”

“What?” I snarled, rounding on the questioner.

Nicephorus was standing by the captain’s throne, its hands tucked into side sleeves.

Its face was grave.

“You had better come with me.”

CHAPTER 79

AGE OF MIRACLES

DARKNESS REIGNED IN THE royal apartments. Darkness and silence. The place seemed preserved in amber, the image of some yesteryear captured in oils—or in ink. Liveried androgyns stood all around, their postures perfect.

It was easy to forget there was a battle raging outside. The very air seemed hardly to move, as if *Aurora* held her breath. I knew—well before I saw the pale, tired face of Doctor Vrabel, I knew—that something had changed. The *ping-ping-ping* of medical instrumentation broke time to small pieces, each one falling, smashing on the floor about our feet. The report of the guns was like far-off thunder, as though we'd come to some palace of the dead and dying on a night of rain.

A hermetic enclosure had been set up in the center of the chamber, displacing what little furniture had remained. Tables, chairs, couches—nearly all had been removed to accommodate the Emperor's cell. Only a single settee remained against the left wall, a table beside it. Apart from that couch, only the piano remained, pushed awkwardly to one side, beyond the confines of the tent.

The man himself lay upon a bed of starkest white. The white of medicine. Of sickness. Of Empire. He seemed not to have noticed our arrival—for no herald spoke, nor lictor beat his fasces on the tiled floor. He lay staring up at the harsh medical lighting in the roof of the tent above, green eyes fixed on something no other man could see. Someone had covered the Emperor in a white sheet, had wrapped that sheet under his right arm and up over the left shoulder, so that only his face and right arm were visible beyond the coverlets. From the drape of those blankets, I guessed that Vrabel had cut the left arm away in the weeks since last I'd seen His Radiance.

“William.” I spoke then without preamble, without introduction or address.

Not a soul objected.

The golden mask lay on a steel tray at the man’s bedside.

The face that turned toward me was the face I had seen frozen in the tank before: scabbed, scarred, swollen on the left with new and ceaseless growth. The lips moved, but for a moment no sound came out. Then he smiled, and the smile erased much of the anguish in his face. “Cousin,” he said softly. “You came.”

“Syriani Dorayaica is dead,” I said, and watched Caesar’s eyes fall closed with triumph.

“Then it is over,” said he. “The horde will . . . will shake itself to pieces. This . . . is the end.”

Doctor Vrabel’s pale eyes were on me. The man stood alongside the Emperor’s bier, dressed in the quilted white suit of a technician, his face crestfallen behind the helmet that preserved him from the Emperor’s disease.

“Not yet,” I said, restoring my attention to His Radiance. “Not quite.”

Cassandra had remained a few steps behind me.

William’s face was a crawling horror—a domain of lesions, of weeping sores, of corruption—the Empire incarnate. But he raised his hand, curled his fingers—they were bare—made a fist that shook with either palsy or emotion. “No, cousin,” he said, more strongly then. “It is done. *You* have done it.”

“The Watchers remain,” I said, and marked the way Vrabel’s face fell as he muttered the word *Watchers*. But the time for secrets was long past. Every man in the system had seen the monsters with his own eyes, or knew someone who had. Not a one of them—not one of those many millions—could deny the eldritch truth.

History was over. The age of miracles had begun.

“I wounded one of them,” I said. “The other I threw back and bought us a little time . . . but I cannot beat them. Not without *Astrophage*.”

William’s fist fell back upon the coverlets, and he seemed to sink into

the cushions, as though the gravity acting on him were changed. "Then it is time," he said at last.

"It is time," I agreed, drawing as near the sterile membrane between us as I could. "You must take your men to safety. You *must* sound the general retreat. The Cielcin—"

The hand rose again, palm toward me: a wordless command.

Despite the circumstance—his ailing health, my power, my achievements—still he exerted gravity enough to stop my tongue.

"No."

The word was like a leaden weight. Neutronium. Star-iron falling.

No.

"No?" I was so near the membrane my nose almost touched the heavy plastic. "William, the weapon is primed. The Cielcin fleet is scattered. With Dorayaica gone, they are leaderless. There is no interface between them and their gods. They will not know what it is we have done until the light reaches them . . . and by then it will be too late. This ship is the heart of the Empire now. The realm needs you!"

"The *realm* . . ." the word sparked with meaning, a live wire, "needs . . . an *Emperor*." Nicephorus's face might have been thousand-year-old plaster. Its makeup was flaking, lending the Lord Chamberlain an appearance that recalled no less than the Prophet itself. Its lips pressed together, brows contracting as William said, "It does not need me."

I turned to face him, wincing as pain lanced up my arm.

I knew what he meant, what he must mean. "Radiance," I said at last, establishing a piece of that formal distance between us once again, "I must refuse."

"You *must* not refuse," said William. "There is no other. Alexander is the Chantry's creature. Matthias is as well. Aurelian is dead. Our other sons and daughters are either dead or scattered to the wind. Our brothers are old—those that remain, and they are all without issue. Our—"

"There will be war," I said, speaking over his objections. "They will say I suborned Selene, that I have bent her to my will . . ."

"Selene?" William shook his head, drawing out a fit of coughing.

“Selene will be all right. You will be her shield.” His hand was still raised, reshaped itself into an accusing finger. “But *you* must sit the Solar Throne, Hadrian. Not Selene.”

An ocean black as forever washed over me then, the jaws of eternity closing fast about my waist. *The Emperor*, I thought, recoiling. *Me?*

It was as though the tiled deck at my feet had become some boggy mire. *Me?*

Was it so incredible? I was Auctor of the Imperium already, the first in thousands of years. “Your ship,” the Emperor said. “You possess ultimate power. Power over the Chantry. Over the Extrasolarians. What are the great houses measured against these? What is Jadd? The Commonwealth?” His arm left brown stains and yellow where it touched the blankets. “You are right. The Empire has always had *two* hearts.” He raised the requisite number of fingers. “With Forum destroyed, only Earth remains.”

Earth.

The Shadow Kingdom.

The Secret Masters of the Empire.

They would take the board at last: that hidden player, that king in bishop’s weeds.

My mind went back to that icon of Fate in the Grand Sanctum, so like an image of the Watchers. Would I deliver mankind from the White Hand of the Cielcin, only to deliver them into the black hands of the Chantry? From the rising tide to the tower. From the desert to the tyranny of stone.

“None will dare defy you,” William said, “not after what we do this day.”

I drew back. “You would have me hold the galaxy together through fear.”

“I would have you *forge* a lasting peace!” William’s words were like the breath of winter through bare branches. “The only way we can!” He broke off abruptly, coughing, drawing Vrael to his side. The Emperor gripped the physician by his wrist to fend him off. “I meant to see it through, you know? The Cielcin. The Chantry. The Commonwealth. All of it. My children . . . were supposed to inherit peace. *My* peace . . .” He turned his

eyes to heaven. “But I failed. After more than a thousand years of trying . . . I—” His jaw firmed. “But you. You will finish it, cousin. For the both of us. For good and all.”

Nicephorus had approached, stood level with my shoulder. I could sense the tension in the eunuch. The brittle anger. The conviction. Nicephorus had never liked me, never trusted me, but it was its master’s creature, and loyal to the last. “I am to give you this,” it said, and produced a wooden box. It was perhaps half a cubit square, and a little more than an inch tall, intricately carved with the icon of the Imperial sun on its face. Nicephorus depressed a thumb reader on one edge, and the clamshell opened, revealing eight rings of yellow gold. I knew them at once, had worn one like them long, long ago.

They were the Emperor’s own.

“I had them cleaned,” said William the Great, last of the line of kings, Emperor of Mankind, “and made ready for their new master.”

I hesitated, longing to see then the arcs of all possible futures. “Me?” I said again, hand floating over the rings on their velvet pillow. Did I dare to take them? To take even one?

Emperor.

I saw again my banner hoisted by the rioters in doomed Catraeth, and the image of Selene twisted to serve as my seat. There would be war, whether William wanted it or no. His family had ruled the galaxy for generations, for more than fifteen thousand years. What he proposed was no less than the breaking of the world. The end of history, indeed.

“You would have *me* take the throne?” I asked again. “Not Selene?”

“You already have,” said His Radiance. “I have keyed the genetic database to you.”

The ground shifted beneath my feet. “To me?”

“The doors will open for you,” he said. “You have the power of life and death over every nobile family in the Imperium. Those families to whom you grant a child will know future generations. Those families you refuse, you destroy.”

Unbidden, I seized the first of the right rings. It was a heavy thing, with

a broad, flat bezel set with a carnelian laser-etched with the sign of the Imperial sun. *Life and death . . .*

“The great houses will not dare oppose you. With the Mericanii weapons at your command, you can bring the Chantry and their allies to heel. There need not be another war.”

“They will never accept me,” I said.

“There is no other,” William said. “You must rule.”

I saw the red star rising, heard men calling out my name. There was Bassander Lin, standing at the head of my legions, prisoners kneeling at his feet. I saw Alphonse Bourbon among them. Lin raised his pistol, aimed it square at the Bourbon prince’s face.

“I set out to save humanity,” I said—and it was not entirely true. “Not to rule it.”

“Who will rule if you do not?”

“Perhaps no one should,” I said, and felt the mad impulse to cast the ring aside, as I had cast the ring my father gave me into a corner of my room in Castle Borosevo, never to be seen again. The power William offered me was evil. An affront against nature, against the Unmade’s design. My heart went out to Crispin, denied the joy of fatherhood.

I was at once conscious of Cassandra’s presence. I looked at her.

“That is no option,” said the Emperor. “If you will not serve, the throne will go to those strong enough to take it.”

He was right, I knew, as I knew that it had only been his strength of character, his carefully laid plans, that had kept the throne in his hands all these long centuries. He had created the Excubitors to guard his person, hardened Special Security, raised up HAPSIS to counter the pressures of the Chantry in secret, played his enemies against one another, acquiesced to the Chantry’s choice of heir until the bitter end. With Here Soonchanged and Orphan, I had handed him his final victory. The greatest part of the Chantry’s leadership in Gododdin system had died with Gododdin itself, destroyed by the Cielcin strike against the planet.

“I will go to Earth,” I said.

“You are the God Emperor,” said the true Emperor, “the One Reborn.”

“I’m not,” I said, still holding the ring.

“You *must* destroy the Chantry,” William said. His eyes were far away, “I will keep my court with me, and as much of their power as I may. Destroy them, when you destroy the Cielcin, and the path to the throne will be clear.”

I looked at him, and the ruin of his face, his body crumbling as surely as Dorayaica’s had been, consumed by a different devil, one made by his fellow man. “They will say I killed you,” I said, “to take the throne.”

“They say a lot of things,” William said, and they were my own words hurled back at me.

My whole body shook.

It did not matter what I wanted. It had never mattered. What mattered was that I conformed my will to need. And the need was that I should burn the world away. It was for this I was made, for this I met the eyes of my other self in the stone of Calagah, for this I answered Brethren’s call, and heeded the voice on the mount on Annica. The prophecy of the Aventine House was true, in a sense, for I was scion of that same house, the least fruit of its least branch, but a fruit all the same, one from which the tree would be planted afresh when all the forest was burnt.

And I was the match.

And the kindling.

“There are”—the Emperor’s voice quavered, and Doctor Vrabel seized his hand to comfort him—“the Monumentals . . . to consider as well.” He was looking at me, and I was shocked to see his face was smiling. “We will stop them here, while you . . . destroy the sun.” The smile took on a savage quality, and I reminded myself that here was a man who had spent most of his life at war.

I closed my fist around the ring.

“I do not want this,” I said at last.

“What does that matter?” William asked, voice sharp. “*Want* is for children. We are men. We do what is required of us . . . You can end this war, but that is not enough. You must make peace, and that means *the throne*.”

I could only shut my eyes, and stand there, feeling the distant thunder of the guns, the war so near at hand, yet so remote. *The throne*. I saw the vision then again, saw myself crowned in living gold, Selene at my feet in a gown of brilliant roses—red and white. There was peace that way, and hope—but there was terror, too. Ushara had offered me what William offered then: dominion. I had seen my sons by her, heroes great and terrible. Were those not false promises?

And yet, I could not refuse, for who might rule in my place?

Alexander? He was an empty vessel, a cracked alembic for the distillation of the Chantry's future. Matthias was worse. Aurelian was dead, and Selene would not rule without me. There was no real alternative. Bourbon would not accept Habsburg, Habsburg Mahidol. Mahidol would never kneel to Yamato, and so on and on. Only the imprimatur of the God Emperor's bloodline had set the Aventine over all.

That was why William had chosen me.

I took in a long, shuddering breath . . . and placed the ring upon my finger. I held it up for the Emperor's examination. "I'll do it," I said, and took up the second ring. "I'll do it, William."

He smiled. "I hope you will forgive me," he said, "one day. Selene . . ." A fit of coughing overtook him then, and blood speckled the white sheet. He thumped the mattress with his fist, angry with himself. "She will . . . help you, you . . . will not need to be alone. *Like me*." He shut his eyes. "Maria . . . forgive me. I—"

"William," Nicephorus interjected.

"Nicky!" William coughed again. "The rings. Give him the rings."

I set the second on my finger, gathered the third.

"You must understand," William said, speaking quickly, voice hardly more than a whisper. "Nicky. You must make him understand. The keys. The keys!"

"I will," said Nicephorus.

"Take Nicky with you," William said. "He will show you the way. I have taken precautions. You will—you must make a son by Selene. You must order one *at once*. You must protect the succession.

“You have been a brother to me,” said William, and looking up, I found his eyes on Nicephorus. Still, there were tears in my own. It pained me to see him—who had outshone the very sun—brought so low.

The Emperor’s rings were like lead weights upon my fingers. “The steps. The steps are gone. The Arch of Titus. Your coronation . . . will look different. You must make your own path, cousin.”

“I always have.”

“Ha!” William looked at the ceiling. *Aurora* shook. “The battle. It goes poorly.”

“It does,” I said.

William’s hand found his face, explored the deformation the *lethovirus* had made. I could see his heartbeat in the tumescent growth on his forehead. “Better death by fire than this . . .” His eyes were bright and shining. “Go and make an end. We will hold the Cielcin, and their gods—should they return.”

I made my hands into fists. “I will.”

“Burn the Cielcin to ash,” he said. “Destroy them, and all our enemies.”

“I will.”

“Good,” he said. “Enoch?” He reached out, searching for Vrabel’s hand. “Help me stand.”

The doctor hesitated. “Radiant Majesty,” he said, “I am not sure you can.”

“I am scion of the House of Windsor, a descendant of Arthur Himself. I will stand, damn you! One more time.” At this Enoch Vrabel hurried forward to aid his patient. William wore a white gown beneath the pale coverlets. The left sleeve was pinned to the shoulder. A ghost he seemed to me in that moment.

He stood before me then, a swaying nightmare, a horror as terrible as the poor wretch I’d witnessed behind glass in the lazaret on Ganelon—made more terrible by the fact that I loved him.

“The Emperor is dead,” William said, and raised his hand once more, in benediction and—this time—in farewell. Unsteady then, William the Great, Emperor of Mankind, Emperor of the Sollans, did a thing I had not seen

him do in all his days. He bent his neck to another man, one hand gripping Vrabel's arm as tightly as he could, and bowed deeply, saying, "Long live the Emperor."

Long live the Emperor.

Thus bidden, Nicephorus began to chant, reciting the names and titles of a stranger: "His Imperial Radiance, the Emperor Hadrian Anaxander of the House Marlowe-Victorian; King of Earth and Mars; of Avalon, of Delos, of Tiryns, Ptolemy, Nessus, and Marinus; Archduke of Shakespeare; Duke of Renaissance; Prince Imperator of the Arms of Orion, of Sagittarius, of Perseus, and Centaurus; Grand Strategos of the Legions of the Sun; North Star of the Constellations of the Blood Palatine; Defender of the Children of Men; and Servant of the Servants of Earth."

"Long may he reign," said William the Great, standing, swaying where he stood, buttressed by little Doctor Vrabel. "Go now. Do what must . . . what must be . . ."

My hands became fists, rings terribly present. *What must be.*

This must be.

Nicephorus's words hung like incense in the air—like gunsmoke.

The Emperor Hadrian Anaxander . . .

The Emperor . . .

The Emperor!

I felt my shoulders straighten, and the pain in the left did not stop me. The mantle unseen settled on my shoulders, a thing bright and heavy as stars.

"We must go," said Nicephorus, and at once I was cognizant of the cannon fire that shook the vessel. The battle—which had seemed so far away—was then terribly present.

It was time to end it—to end all.

I turned to go, uncertain what more could be said.

"Cousin . . ." William's voice halted me before I had gone three paces. "Tell me: What awaits me . . . after the end?"

I stopped, eyes lingering on Cassandra a moment.

"There is night," I said slowly. What I had were promises. Promises and

hope. “But there is day again after . . .”

Then Cassandra spoke. “Your dead will come to greet you at the gates to paradise,” said she, and surprised me in saying it. “Knock, and the doors will open.”

The old Emperor smiled, bowed his head like a schoolboy in the presence of his teachers. “Then I will see you when you come,” he said, “and this is not farewell.”

“I will look for you,” I said, and raised my hand.

William bowed his head.

Then Enoch Vrabel—a dead man himself, as was every man aboard *Aurora*—raised his own hand, made a curious gesture, his fingers separated into two and two. “Lord bless and keep you,” he said.

I bowed my head, and turned to go as the former Emperor sank back to his deathbed, attended by the physician with whom he would share his pyre.

It was the last time I saw poor William alive.

When I think of him, it is most often of that moment. But when I do, he is whole, for whole he seemed to me, his spirit unaffected by the ravages of his flesh. In his way, he reminded me of Radhassa, who had nobly borne the pain and iniquity of her chains without loss of dignity. He was a man stronger than horror, untouched by despair. A man as men wish to be, whatever his failings—and I had long since forgiven him those. In him was the glory of man undimmed, untouched by disease, by suffering—made brighter by suffering.

He had transcended suffering, making weakness his strength.

By that strength he had ruled, and held fast his crumbling Empire, that it might endure until that final day . . . when I would come to shatter it, as the Absolute intended.

CHAPTER 80

OF SERPENTS AND SORCERERS

RAMANTHANU AND OTOMNO HAD been detained in the vestibule, held there by members of the Knights Excubitor. I freed them with a word and ordered shields found for them. “*Ichakta-kih*,” I said, and gesturing to the captain, extended my arm. “Take this.”

An object gleamed red and silver in my hand.

It was Olorin’s sword, the weapon he had given me the day I left Emesh seeking peace.

The inhuman took it without a word.

“We must depart at once,” Nicephorus was saying. “The fleet cannot hold for long.”

The androgyn was right. The initial attack had shattered any and all hope of victory by conventional means. We needed *Demiurge*.

“Tell Captain Rice to clear our path,” I said, sure that William had already done so. We had reached the door at the end of the vestibule. “You two!” I indicated the Excubitors standing inside the mighty doors. The presence of two at least of the Excubitors would speed our passage. Their mirrored faces brooked no argument. “With us!”

The two praetorians hastened to obey, and the doors slid open.

A hundred guns were aimed at us, a hundred lances trained.

I should have expected them, yet the sight of their plumed helmets, their white cloaks, their armor red and golden, stopped me sure as if they had opened fire. They filled the hall before us, lancers kneeling, gunmen standing behind. They crowded in from all sides, between us and the foremost of the columns that supported the vaulted atrium, totally blocking the exits ahead and to either side. Above us, a fresco depicting the conquest of the machines shone brightly, illuminated by ring lights high in the pillars.

It showed a city of white pyramids burning, the God Emperor's fleet descending while Mother Earth—a naked giantess crowned with stars—brandished a sword whose blade was sunlight.

A glittering lie.

"That's far enough!" Amon Kosis stood at the fore, his weapon drawn, aimed squarely at my chest. His scarred, leathered face shone dully in the light, a crude bit of scrimshaw, while somewhere far off alarms blared—unheard in the royal apartments. I felt as one shaken too suddenly from sleep, so disoriented was I.

The rings on my fingers weighed heavily as I clenched my hands.

Was it really the same day? Had it been mere hours since I crossed the netherworld to Dharan-Tun? Since Dorayaica breathed its last? Since Ushara tried to claim me and *Voidmaker* spilled its ruin across the night?

It felt like centuries.

Life is very long.

"Supreme Legate!" Nicephorus was indignant. "What is the meaning of this? Explain—"

"Silence, mandrake!" said Amon Kosis, brandishing his pistol.

The slur stopped Nicephorus dead in its tracks. When it spoke, it was in a voice deadly cold. "You *dare*?"

"I said *silence*!" said Kosis, eyes darting from face to face. "Conspiracy! High treason! Regicide! What did he promise you? What could he?"

"Regicide?" Cassandra echoed the crucial word. "The Emperor lives!"

I looked Amon Kosis square in his square face. William's life was numbered in days, perhaps in hours. Who could say I did not kill him with my own hands? Only Doctor Vrabel and the androgyns, and they were nothing—all easily silenced.

"Where is he, Amon?" I asked, and I was pleased to find my voice was steady. "You've freed him, haven't you?"

The Supreme Legate ignored me. "Your weapons, please."

"Let us not play these games," I said, and showed the legate my empty hands. "You know we haven't time for this. You have to choose: Your fool master, or the fate of all mankind."

Kosis said nothing. The Martian line did not waver.

"I have the means to end this," I said, not moving. "You know I do."

I could almost hear the gears in his mind turning. He knew I spoke the truth.

"William named Lord Marlowe his successor," said Nicephorus, "his son by adoption."

"His son?" Amon Kosis shook himself. "Impossible."

"You're overrun," I said, peering into the legate's face. "The Cielcin are already on board this ship, and they won't be alone." I could see nothing of Ushara's shadow on him, nor sense Miudanar's foul hand.

Kosis brandished his gun again. "I will give you only one more chance," said he. "Put down your weapons. You will surrender the Mericanii ship to us, and you will give us the mutant and the Princess Selene." He meant Orphan. "Do this, and you and your daughter will be granted the dignity of exile."

"And if I refuse?" I asked.

Kosis raised his gun. "You must not refuse."

They were a hundred strong at least, Martian warriors all—each seven feet tall or more, their bodies strengthened by genetic therapies and growth hormones to compensate for the low gravity of their home. Each was worth three lesser men, I knew.

We were five—seven, with the two Excubitors—and one of us was no fighter. Yet we were not wholly alone. A dozen more of the Knights Excubitor stood outside the door, their swords drawn. I might call upon them, take the Martians by surprise. The Excubitors were stronger, faster, better equipped. But even were I to add their strength to ours, we were outnumbered more than five to one.

"Enough of this!" another voice intruded, one terse and shrill, muddled and amplified by a suit helmet. "Shoot the girl!"

"Hold!" Amon Kosis raised his hand.

Cassandra snarled, raised and kindled her blade.

The order had come—seemingly—from one of the Martian rank and file. I could not tell which. But the voice . . .

“Alexander!” I raised my chin. “Show yourself!”

A serpent stirred, disturbed from its den. One of the Martian rank and file stood forth then, his armor indistinguishable from the rest, his Corinthian helm crowned with a crest of red hair. As he stepped out, I saw he carried no lance, held instead the familiar gilded handle of an unfired blade.

“Don’t try it!” said he, and brandished his hilt like a semaphore. With his free hand, he reached up, unsealed his helm, and pulled it up to rest it on his brow. My hand had found my own blade. His face was white with rage. “You want the throne.”

“I want nothing.”

“Liar!” he said, spitting venom. “You took my father from me! Made mock of his house! You have made *my sister* a whore! And now you use the fog of war to take the throne from a dying man with your false promises of victory?” He beat his breast. “Did you think we were beaten? *Blind?* This is *my ship*, Marlowe! Mine!” He stamped, and the ringing of his heel was like a knell. “I’m the one who built this fleet up! The one who has stayed by his side from the beginning! Not you! Me!”

“If you do not step aside,” I said, voice calm, “you will die.”

As if to underscore my words, the vessel rocked beneath us. But the prince’s face shone, transfigured by fury, and he snatched his helm from his head and hurled it down. “I *will* kill you!”

“Alexander, enough!” Nicephorus intervened. “This is your father’s will!”

The prince glared at the eunuch, wide-eyed, wild-haired. “Father’s *will?*” His nostrils flared. “My father is an ill man. He does not know his own will. You know that. You know this is madness! You know what Marlowe is. Look behind you, Uncle. There are Cielcin standing at your back!”

Ramanthanu growled, bared its fangs in challenge.

“I will give you one more chance, *Hadrian*,” Alexander said. “Hand over the ship and my sister, and you and your witch’s get can go. Refuse . . .” He kindled his blade—his father’s blade. “. . . and I’ll kill her.”

“As if you can!” Cassandra said, blade at the ready.

“That is *enough*, Alexander,” said another voice, one colder and more venomous by far than the prince himself.

The serpent turned again, exposed another coil, another face.

Yod appeared from behind the Martians like a pale star from behind some moon. His head was bare, his face Death, his eyes painted black with charcoal—black as the runemark on his brow. He looked . . . *different* somehow. There was something in his face I could not place . . . something in the posture of his jaw, perhaps, or in the way his muscles pulled to form that hideous grin. “The girl holds Marlowe’s leash,” he said. “Kill her, and we lose him.”

Alexander hesitated, his blade faltering, tracing little circles on the air.

“You will not have *Demiurge*,” I said. “Our deaths will give you nothing but the throne.”

“Nothing but the throne?” Alexander shrilled. “Have you—”

“Silence!” said Yod, eyes closed. The prince was silent, and in that silence, the Cantor spoke, eyes hard and gray as flints. “You would doom your people out of spite?”

My eyes were on Prince Alexander—the man who would be king—so easily muzzled. “They are doomed no matter what I do,” I said. “There are fates far worse than death.”

“None worse than extinction,” Yod said.

“How did you escape Gododdin?” I asked, though I was sure I could guess.

“Mother Earth is kind.”

They could not kill me, not and achieve their aims. They must have known the power that William had invested in me, must have known what it meant to be made the Emperor. And they would not win *Demiurge* from me, either. Edouard and Orphan would never surrender it.

They had no plan, I realized.

They had to keep talking.

“Mother Earth indeed,” I said.

“I said don’t try it!” Alexander snarled.

My hand was on my sword. I smiled, but did not let it go. “Go to your father, boy,” I said. “He is dying, but he is not yet dead. Go to him, and let me be. I am your only hope of victory.”

Alexander was a man at war with himself. I saw the grief in him . . . the anger and the terror. His father *was* dying. He knew that much was true. Yet he was torn, pulled so many ways.

“Victory?” he said, and a fell laugh escaped him. His shoulders shook. “You mean to kill us all! You were going to leave us here to die. I know your plan. I heard every word.”

“Then you know it was your father’s plan,” I said.

Alexander clenched his jaw, took half a step toward me, blade rippling on the air.

“Let him go, O Prince!” Yod’s voice was like a whip cracking, and Alexander froze.

“Those are my father’s rings!” he said, almost lamely.

I did not speak. So delicate was the moment, a thing of gossamer and glass. The barest motion would smash all things to pieces.

“I said *Let him go, O Prince*,” said Yod, eyes locked on my face. “He is right. He is our best hope for victory.” His smile betrayed his dripping fangs. “Let him pass. Let him slay the Cielcin for us. Let him end the war.”

I advanced a step. Just one step, head turned to one side.

The trap closed a moment later. “Then let him return to us.”

“He will not return—” said Amon Kosis.

“He *will* return!” said Yod, eyes shifting to Cassandra. “For his bastard girl!” He smiled wickedly, returned his attention to me. “We will keep her safe. A hostage! You will use your weapon, and you will deliver the ship to us at Tenba . . .” He raised a hand, one long slim finger extended. “If you refuse—if you do not return—I will give the girl over to Lord Kosis and his men. I am certain they will find a use for her.”

Cassandra lurched forward. I had to stop her with a raised hand as her curses filled the air with fire. “Anaryan!”

“Abba!” she snarled. “You can’t—”

I had to turn fully to face her, setting my back to the triumvirs and their

ilk. “I’m sorry,” I said, conscious of the sword still living in her hands. We had come so far, so near the end . . . “I’m sorry.” I held her face in my hands.

I had never seen this moment, had never foreseen it. Never in all my visions had I seen the manner of my ascension, the moment I took the throne. How many times had I seen myself seated amid all that red and scarlet, Selene at my feet in a gown of living flowers?

I had not seen Cassandra there.

Here then was the final test. The final trial. The other half of the test I had endured in Ragama’s temple. It was for her sake I had not slain my god, for her sake I had not destroyed my suffering. Now he asked me to give her up, to hand her to my enemies. “I’m sorry,” I said once more, her face now disbelieving. The path—my path—lay forward, through the Martian ranks. If I was to do as I’d been commanded to do, needs must that I walk away, that I surrender my daughter, and Nicephorus, and the throne.

And Ramanthanu and Otomno, and the hope I had for their future.

Why? Why? Why?

I could not believe it, and yet I could see no other way.

Distant alarums rang, and *Aurora*—then the heart of Empire—quaked to the music of war. The world was ending. All worlds were ending. Mankind was ending. The future I had seen would not happen. One worse would come to pass. Unless I sacrificed her on their altar.

“I’m sorry.”

I turned, eyes white with tears, and looked at Alexander, at Amon Kosis.

At the sorcerer, Yod.

“You can’t seriously be considering this!” said Lord Nicephorus. “You know what is at stake!” The eunuch meant the royal bloodlines. The genetic constellations.

What were they to me?

I advanced a step, crossing the no-man’s-land between the door to the royal apartments and the Martian line. I could hear armor *click*, weapons rustling in the wind of time. Still Alexander barred my path, his sword raised. He faded from me, withdrawing half a step.

I could kill him, strike him down before the Martians could break my shield. But what would be the point of that? For all his aspirations, Alexander was an empty suit of armor, chosen by Yod and his Earthly masters precisely *because* he was an empty suit. But there were others. Matthias was on board that very ship, and still more of the Aventine House there were, on Avalon or Shakespeare or Renaissance—on some obscurer Imperial holding. They had not all died with the Eternal City. Killing him would achieve nothing. He was so easily replaced.

“Your sword,” said Amon Kosis, sidearm still pointed squarely at my chest, “please.”

“Abba!”

I halted my advance—I was within arm’s reach of the Supreme Legate then—and turned to look at her. She was standing square, sword at her side, lips parted, eyes red and wide. I raised a hand—my empty hand—a wordless order.

Stay back.

How much did it say of her that she did not move?

My heart broke in reverse. We were dead no matter what we did. I saw that plain. They would kill Cassandra regardless of whether or not I returned, would kill me if I returned. The choice was simple: die there with my daughter and all mankind, or abandon her and take the throne.

No choice at all.

I smiled at her, and as I smiled her face broke, the red of her eyes gave way to their native green.

My sword was still in my hand. I felt its weight, its fittings. The winged simurgh. A symbol of rebirth. Of resurrection.

What was death to me? Let them slay me if they dared! If they could! Cassandra had said it herself, when she found me again on Dharan-Tun: that she would rather die than be sent away.

He would not let me die, not when I was so close to his goal.

He would not let us die!

“Excubitors!”

My fingers found the trigger. My wounded shoulder sang. I spun on my

heel, blade flashing to life as I turned. Amon Kosis fired, but his shot broke against my shield. His off hand struggled to draw his sword. Too slow! My own found his neck. He wore no helmet, and so no armor could save him.

The Supreme Legate's head toppled from his shoulders. His body fell at once.

"Shoot him!" Alexander cried, too late.

Shots already broke against my shield, and a Martian lancer thrust at me. I parried him, sliced the bayonet clean from its haft before the man could fire. My eyes were on Yod. The fell sorcerer had frozen, mouth half-agape, eyes narrowed in consternation.

So be it.

The tide of battle crashed between us, the sea of violence closed over my head. I had an instant before my shield died. In that instant, I retreated, saw Cassandra leap past me, and Ramanthanu wielding Olorin's sword. The Excubitors—*my* Excubitors—rushed forward and caught the Martians by surprise. Their motion sowed confusion among the enemy, for who but the Emperor could command his inmost slaves?

"Shoot him!" I saw the whites of Alexander's eyes as he tugged his helmet down. Martian hands seized him, pulled him back.

Cassandra leaped after him, her sword flaring. But the Martians closed between them before she could reach him. I heard her savage cry.

"The prince! Guard the prince!"

My shield pack vibrated, sounded its alarm.

Yod smiled, his eyes still on me. Cassandra had cut down two of the Martian line in swift succession. In among their lances, she had some coverage from their gunfire. Their weapons were too long, too close to get off a shot. Then hands seized me, and four of the Excubitors placed themselves between the Martian Guard and myself. One lay already dead upon the floor, while the others—and the Cielcin—followed after Cassandra. Only Nicephorus had not moved.

The Excubitors had bought me precious seconds, but their shields could not hold for long, and their armor would win only a little additional time. I

had lost Alexander in the chaos, his armor making him only one Martian among many. Had his crest been red or white?

“Anaryan!” I cried. “To me! To me!”

I saw her face, white in the stark light and flushed with violence, her eyes wild in the fray. As I watched she slashed a Martian lance in twain. The man’s arm fell a moment later, his head a moment after that.

“To me!” I said. “We stay together!”

The light in her face then was a thing close to joy, but wild. Our only hope was to make a wedge, to puncture the Martian line and make for one of the corridors. If we could get out of the hall, we could force our pursuers into closer quarters, force them into a bottleneck.

Alarms were ringing. The light of lasers and shout of plasma fire filled the hall, stray shots blackening the priceless fresco overhead. I heard men shouting in the mongrel English of Mars, but around me—for just a moment—all was still. No shot reached me, no action compelled. Yod was still watching from the rear of the Martian line.

That was when I heard it: the sound of our salvation.

A cry.

Not the high screaming of the Cielcin, nor the hideous roar of men-become-beasts, nor the inhuman music of the Watchers. It was a thing high and musical: an ululating, undulating cry. “*Alala! Alala!*” it went. “*Alala! Alala!*”

“*Alala!*” Cassandra cried in answer, and it was only when the noise came from her mouth that I knew it for what it was. “*Il Jaddi!*” she said. “*Il Jaddi!*”

The Jaddians! The Jaddians! The Jaddians had come.

But how? From where? And why were they aboard?

These questions ran from my mind the next instant.

Shots streamed from the hall to our right, tore into the Martian flank, so that their formation cracked, shattered from sheer surprise. Yod’s face—already bloodless—lost all color. I saw him startle, and fearing he would flee, I pressed past the Excubitors—shoulder screaming as I brushed them aside. I would take another head from the hydra if I could.

But the man had escaped Gododdin. Surely Tarquin and the others had as well. And Yod and Tarquin both were only fingers of the monster's true head on Earth. I clenched my teeth. Too long had the sorcerers played their game, leaning on the lords of light and empire from their kingdoms of secrets and of shadows.

But I could not let him get away.

My shield flashed as the beam of a lance broke against it, and I heard the system alarm shrill near its last. Another shot would kill it. Perhaps two.

Had Alexander escaped?

Did it matter? Kosis was dead. Yod remained. I saw him standing there, behind the Martians by the door opposite the one through which we'd entered. Jaddian soldiers had reached the mouth of the hall at our right. Their chromed armor shone!

"You cannot win, gentle lord!" the Cantor called, and raised his chin. "You will never sit the throne."

"Just as well!" I said. "My business is with the Cielcin!"

"The Cielcin," said he, "are nothing! You know it is so! You know what is out there! What awaits us! What will happen if you fire that weapon of yours. They will see! Every one of them. They will know what man is—what he has become! They will destroy us!"

His words stopped me in my tracks. "You want the Cielcin to win."

Yod's face was cold, indifferent to the carnage. "Mankind must survive," he said, "at any cost."

"You would . . . sacrifice the Empire?"

"We will change it," he said.

"You were never going to let me leave," I said, and paused. The ship. They must have put something on board my ship. The daimon, D, or one of its kindred. They must have programmed it to seize *Demiurge* the moment I returned.

Cassandra shoved past me in her eagerness to slay the man, heedless of her danger, of the odds, the numbers stacked against her. Injured as I was, I lurched after her, stretching myself across time, so that the beam that should have shattered my shield and stopped my heart slid past me and through

me, always striking a place I only *might* have been. One Martian raised his lance in challenge, and I clove his weapon in two before I swept the man's head from his shoulders. Simultaneously, I thrust my blade through the bowels of another, and struck the legs out from under a third.

The wave I had become collapsed, and two men fell dead at once, while the third fell screaming. Then I was only myself again. Only a man. One man with a wounded arm, his coat fallen from his shoulders.

Still Yod did not turn and run. Not when Cassandra slew the last of his guards. Not when Ramanthanu knocked him to the ground. The priest wore no armor, no helmet, no mask, and so the lop-horned captain slammed its horned forehead into the Cantor's tattooed face. I watched them, frozen, stunned, as Ramanthanu knelt atop its quarry, towering over the fallen sorcerer.

Cassandra's shadow fell. She paused a moment—only a moment—the battle raging around her. She had unkindled her blade, and pointed the hilt at Yod's face like a gun. Her fingers found the triggers, and the blade sprang out like a shot.

Her eyes met Ramanthanu's.

"We need to go," I said. "Nicephorus!"

I turned, seeking the eunuch in the carnage, but what I found stopped my heart. I froze, witness to a figure out of Hades, a shade released from Tartarus itself. Full black his raiment, black as a moonless night, and black the mask upon his face. Black too his hair, though this was shot with silver, like the lightning on a night all dark. From his shoulder flew a *mandyas* of emerald green, woven of blue-eyed feathers taken from the false simurgh made for his house by the murderous Prince of Oannos long ago, and my heart cried aloud with joy at the sight of him.

"Olorin!"

CHAPTER 81

A WILDERNESS OF TIGERS

WE WERE SURROUNDED BY dead men. Their blood ran red on the black decking, while Mother Earth—that archdemon—looked down from on high. The Jaddians had done their work. And the Excubitors. And Cassandra and my Cielcin.

And I had done mine—though it was not enough.

“This is an evil fate,” said Olorin, standing with his sword singing in the still air. “We have enemy enough in the Cielcin without this . . .” He spurned the nearest Martian with his toe. “Are we not brothers? Allies in this war?”

“No,” I said, staring down at what remained of the Cantor, a hole—black and red—in his face. Cassandra’s blade had annihilated his runemark, passed clean between his eyes. “We’re not.”

The Chantry wanted our defeat, wanted to break the Empire, that *their* empire might step into the light. That was why they wanted *Demiurge* so desperately—that they might use it for themselves, and win the war when William and all his works were dust. Well I remembered the weapons the Chantry had brought to bear against us at Vorgossos.

The Cielcin are nothing, Yod had said.

“They’re trying to stop me,” I said, eying the prince of Jadd. “They fear what the other Watchers will do if I use the weapon.”

“The others?” Olorin asked. “Are they here?”

I hesitated in answering him.

“No,” I said. “No, but—”

“We cannot remain,” said Lord Nicephorus, having emerged from whatever hiding place it had found from the violence.

“They’ll never let us leave,” said Cassandra.

“They will let me leave,” said Olorin, though we both knew it was not true.

I looked round at him in wonder, and despite the horror churning in my heart, I managed to say, “I can’t believe you’re alive.”

The Prince of Jadd’s mask clicked as he smiled, teeth flashing. “We jettisoned *Mnemon*’s bridge section the minute Gododdin was destroyed. The bridge can act as a lifeboat. Our comm array was damaged in the escape, but we came directly here . . .” His face fell. “I am losing a great many men . . . a great many . . .”

“Tiada?” I asked, realizing the swordswoman was not there. “Kalima?”

The prince could only shake his head.

“*Mi Domi*,” said one Jaddian aryabite, armored blue and chrome. “*Non rimiris huna*.”

We can’t stay here.

Belatedly I recognized the voice of the other Hadrian, Captain Adraiano Azhar.

Olorin grasped my good shoulder, fixed me with the full pressure of his gaze. “Is the Emperor truly dead?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “Not yet.”

The prince looked past me to the door that led back the way we had come. “Can he be moved?”

“No,” said Nicephorus flatly. “There is nothing to save.”

“His testimony may prove crucial,” Olorin said, looking to me.

“He intends that this ship should remain here,” I said. “To fight the Cielcin.”

Olorin’s eyes widened. “He would let his people die? His own sons?”

A shadow lay heavy then upon my heart.

Nicephorus said, “He would do whatever he had to do, for the good of his people.”

“Are these not his people?” asked Olorin, looking down at the Martians. “God of Fire . . . but this is a black day . . .”

“Olorin,” I said. “I must get off this ship. *Astrophage* is primed. We

must get word to my people. To Bassander Lin. To Lorian. The Cielcin must be destroyed.” Unkindling my blade, I raised my fist, displayed the Emperor’s rings.

The prince blinked, his mouth fell open. “You?”

“Me,” I said.

“Emperor?”

“For the moment,” I said, and felt Nicephorus stiffen. “Dorayaica is dead. But the Watchers still live, and the Cielcin horde is still a threat . . .” I drew nearer, slotted my blade back into its hasp. “There is much you don’t know. We can end them here, but you must trust me. Can you get us off this ship?” Alexander had fled, and he knew the truth, knew what it was I intended—what the Emperor and I had planned.

I longed to step away, to stride across the space beyond time and come to my journey’s end, but the very design that guarded *Demiurge* against the Watchers concealed her from me. I could return only by ship, through ordinary space.

Olorin seemed to chew his tongue a moment. Then he looked at me. “I can.”

• • •

The docking bays were far below, level upon level, and miles along the length of the mighty vessel. If the trams were closed to us, and every hand turned against us . . .

Alarms were ringing out as we hurried along the corridor. They were not for us. The whole of *Aurora* was at high alert, every man at battle stations, armed and dangerous.

Still, the Emperor had seemed confident of his ability to maintain control of his ship. That meant Adar Rice, at least, was his man, even if Kosis had belonged to the Chantry. But Kosis was dead, and Rice had the command, and to him Alexander was a fugitive. A fugitive, but a prince,

and a prince might yet command allegiance. Kosis had awakened him. Kosis, and Yod.

How had Yod escaped Gododdin? I thought I could guess, and feared the rest of them had as well. Even if they had not, their masters on Earth herself remained: the High Patriarch and his ilk. For how long had they been planning this moment: Their coup, their ascension? Since the Cielcin Wars began? Since William discovered their true nature—whenever that had been?

Or since their beginning?

Since long before I was born . . .

This was their hour.

As it was mine.

I spurred the Excubitors before us, so that they were the first thing people saw as we came. A wall of white and chrome, blades blazing like naked stars. Martian detachments fell back before us, common legionnaires pressed themselves to the walls on either side. With the Jaddians and the praetorians together, our column numbered more than a hundred, and so we barreled down each corridor like a tide, and it was only at the end that I came, flanked by my twin devils.

What must the people have thought to see them?

The vessel shook, and distantly I heard men shouting, and the noise of gunfire, and I knew . . . I knew that we were boarded.

And there they were, leaping across the corridor before us, springing up from side passages like apes through the shattered windows of a zoo. Bright white their faces, and white their wicked blades, and the air about them churned with the music of their drones, their bloody silver *nahute* weaving murder on the air.

Too late, Lord Captain Rice's voice filled the air, issuing from every speaker, every panel, every suit relay in the hall. "Enemy troops have boarded *Aurora*! Enemy troops have boarded *Aurora*! All units! Battle stations!"

The Excubitors and the Cielcin met, but the Cielcin broke before them. Ceramic could not battle highmatter, and the homunculi were more than

human strong. The praetorians cut a bloody path for us, carving the Cielcin boarding party, so that I picked my way over severed limbs and lifeless torsos. When we reached the place where the side passage branched away, I turned, and had a vision of Cielcin warriors emerging from gleaming holes cut in the ceiling. One dropped as I turned to look, caught the rim as it fell—hung there a moment like an ape from the branch of a tree—then alighted amidst the carnage, atop the slab of outer hull their boarding shuttle had cut away.

“Hadrian!” Olorin shouted. “Come!”

I ran, leaving my Excubitors to hold the rear.

We ran, along broad halls and sloping accessways, making for the starboard side, where the docking bays ran along the warship’s equator, just below the level of the promenade.

We reached the gallery above the docking bay in a matter of minutes, Martians and Cielcin battling behind us. There were windows ahead and to the right, echoing bays that canted outward, away from us as they rose, so that we might look out and down on the bay below.

“There it is!” said Cassandra, skidding to a halt.

Demiurge’s black shuttle crouched in the hold below, a smooth, black shape. From above, the relief sculptures that decorated its perimeter could scarce be seen.

And it was surrounded by the men of the Martian Guard.

Nicephorus cursed, and Captain Azhar said, “There must be a couple hundred of them.”

“We’ll never get past them,” said the prince.

I drew up beside them, shoulder aching, and adjusted the drape of the coat on my shoulders to stop it falling. “We have to. I cannot leave that shuttle to the Chantry.” The ship’s daimon was too valuable, too knowledgeable to risk its falling into the hands of that inner enemy.

“They outnumber us three to one at least,” said Olorin.

The noise of fighting floated up the corridor behind. More of the Pale had come aboard.

Eyes locked on the passage whence we’d come, I said, “They’ll have

posted men on your ship as well.”

“It may be fewer,” said Azhar.

“And it may be more,” said I, and swept my eyes over the men of our little company. “We have the Excubitors.” Every one of them was armored in adamant, every one of them armed with a highmatter blade. “We have to try it.”

Adraiano Azhar cursed. “*Noyn jitat!*” he said, “But this is foolishness. We can’t win this. They’re dug in.”

“What about you?” asked Lord Nicephorus, green eyes on me. “These . . . *gifts* of yours. Surely you can do *something*?”

I mulled that over half a moment, eyes flickering from the window to the hall whence came the sounds of fighting.

“They’ve seen us!” Azhar said, pointing.

He was right. The Martians on the ramp to the shuttle had seen us standing there. I’d thought the windows polarized, but now watched as the men below locked ranks, lances moving in unison—as one.

“Move!” I seized Cassandra by the back of the neck with my one good hand, hurled her to the ground. Pain white as sunfire flared in me as I hit the deck, torn shoulder screaming. Shots pierced the glass a moment after, plasma fire and laser light. I’d not expected the glass to shatter, but it did, shards of glassy metal raining down, some of it turned to slag. “Forward!”

What a sight we must have been! The Emperor of Mankind scrabbling on the floor, his one-armed daughter before him, while behind the Prince of Jadd and two Cielcin warriors lurched, surrounded by mamluks and members of the Knights Excubitor.

The Excubitors formed a wall between the windows and myself, covering us both. One of them stooped, and silent offered me its hand. I took it, struggled to my feet as shots struck the wall about us. I let time stretch, pushed the Excubitor before me, so that we went our way forward with care. With every step, I placed my feet in such a way that no shot found us, no bolt struck us down, and when we reached the far side, I turned, and saw the laser fire had burned rings on the back wall of the gallery, like ripples on a pond.

“They’re on the stairs!” said Captain Azhar, shouldering his rifle.

“Excubitors!” I waved the praetorians on. “To the fore!”

If the Martians were fool enough to come to us, fool enough to try the stairs, let them taste highmatter. But there were the Cielcin behind us to consider . . .

Looking back, the far door opened, and a hulking figure appeared. Armored all in white it was, and white the crown of its false horns. I took it for one of Hushansa’s bodies at first, but Hushansa was surely dead, slain with its lord and its gods when *Voidmaker* hollowed out the heart of Dharan-Tun. This was only one of their chimeras, the half-machine devils the Minoan magi had wrought for the Prophet of the Pale.

Cassandra barreled past me, and I punched the door panel to close the shutter.

It would buy us but a little time.

The door to the stairs was ahead on our left, and the sound of fighting issued from it. It would take us down to another corridor, I knew, and straight across would be the bay doors to the hold, where three hundred Martian hoplites waited. We could not field our full force against them. Not at once. The stairs were a bottleneck, a choke point, and while we might prevent their van from climbing to meet us, we could no more descend than they could climb. They had but to concentrate fire on the foot of the stairs. No shield in creation could hold against three hundred lance beams at once, and even I might not dodge them all.

“What are we to do?” asked Olorin, stationed at the door to the stairs.

“We make for our ship!” said Azhar. “The situation may be better there.” The Jaddian mamluks had gone ahead, stood shoulder to shoulder with the praetorians on the landing.

My praetorians.

“I cannot leave the ship in Chantry hands!” I said. “It has a daimon!”

“A daimon!” Azhar looked at me askance. “*Deu di Foti!* But it is black company you keep.”

I ignored him, questing about for a path—as if expecting to find some gleaming breadcrumbs laid out before my feet, or the thread of Ariadne.

“Abba!” Cassandra jostled me. “The ship! The daimon!”

I blinked at her.

“*Yatas essa!*” she said. “Call it! It is armed.”

A sudden vision of cannon fire in the hold below flowered in my mind, and a savage smile—almost the old Marlowe grin—stole over my face, and I tapped my terminal in my sling. “Cover me,” I said, and spoke into my gauntlet. “Ship! Do you read?”

“*Affirmative,*” came the vessel’s flatly masculine reply. “*Alert: Unauthorized personnel aboard.*”

“I know!” I said. “Do you have control of your weapons systems?”

“*Report: Multiple systems compromised. Extensive damage to internal systems detected. Primary sublight engines are disabled. Life-support systems are disabled. Primary and secondary shields are disabled. Translight drive is—*”

I spoke over the creature, shouting. “Can you still fire hull defense weapons?”

A pause. “*Affirmative.*”

“Do it!” I said. “Target the men in the hold!”

“*Complying.*”

I shut my eyes as the sound of cannon fire issued up the stairs, resounded through the superstructure of *Aurora* all around. Good men died senselessly, while behind us the Cielcin hammered on the bulkhead, desperate to find a way inside. Smoke issued from the steps below, smoke and the screams of dying men.

My heart was in my belly.

Primary sublight engines are disabled . . .

We could not even take the ship. Whatever damage Alexander’s Martians had done, we would not repair it and escape. But if I could destroy the ship . . .

“Forward!” Kaim-Olorin was shouting. “*Pros! Pros!*”

Always forward!

We would have to find another way forward, along the lower corridor toward the Jaddian ship. It was the only way.

A *nahute* slithered through the air from the hold below, struck the wall. It passed over the heads of the Excubitors—sensing, I guessed, that they were armored. Cassandra slashed it clean in two.

“They’re ahead of us!”

The windows. They were in the gallery above, and must have hurled their weapons into the hold below.

“The door!” Nicephorus called from the hall behind me, where it stood with Excubitors.

I looked. The blue-white point of a sword had pierced the metal bulkhead. Highmatter. The Cielcin had a sword. One of the weapons dropped by our slain Excubitors. There had to be several in the hall above. Half a dozen at least.

“Abba!” Cassandra’s voice brought me back to myself. She was standing on the landing ahead, blade drawn, gesturing for me to follow.

“Nicephorus!” I said, “Go ahead! I will hold the rear!”

“You are *the Emperor!*” it protested, but I seized the androgyn by the wrist and spurred it on ahead. The Cielcin would be through in seconds.

I shut the door to the stairs.

The fighting at the bottom was chaos, and I leaped over the corpses of the slain—mamluks and Martians alike—to reach the bottom.

Smoke filled the air of the hold. The smoke of sacrifice. The stink of men burning. The shine of laser fire—chalky in the smoking air. The cough of guns. One Cielcin chimera lay sparking on the floor, slain by the Martians or by my own black ship, and still more *scaharimn* had leaped down from the windows above and were fighting with the Martians in the hold. Lances clashed with scimitars. *Nahute* coiled on the air. Men screamed. Cielcin croaked and fell. The ship itself was smoking where the Martians had rounded on it, firing on the cannons that had fired on them.

I knew a moment of stillness then, as I reached the doors to the bay. My sword burned in my hand—cold fire. I held it up before my face, between myself and the war-torn hold, taking stock of the Martians before us, the Cielcin dropping from the shattered gallery above. I felt it then . . . a silence.

Something was coming.

“Olorin!” I cried, drawing the prince’s gaze. “The ship is lost! Where is yours?”

“Ventral hold!” he said. “Not far!”

Aurora had a number of holds along her center line, cothons built into the bottom of the ship, where the larger vessels might have their berth.

I felt a shadow, and looking up—past the Prince of Jadd—I spied the ramp that led back into the ship. All was dark within, the corridors unlighted from the damage the Martians there had done. Something moved in that blackness. For a moment, I feared Miudanar had returned. Or Ushara.

But a boot appeared on the ramp, followed by another, the greaves capped by poleyns fashioned in the likeness of the Gorgon. Upon his breast, a pale light gleamed, a ring of radiance about the relief image of Mother Earth herself. A sword burned in his hand, and his face was lost beneath a sculpted mask black as night without a star. Like Kedron—like Tarquin—he wore an Egyptian *nemes* over his head, its black cloth tipped with gold.

It was a prince of the Chantry.

Four Sentinels emerged behind him, black masked, black armored, chests aglow. As I watched, the black knight raised his open hand, and at a silent command, the *nahute* all fell dead, as they had when Valka slew them with her implants.

A chimera leaped from the balcony above, brandishing an Excubitor’s stolen sword. The Prince-Prior turned his hand on the beast, and it fell dead, slain by some trick, some cheat of computer sorcery.

The other Cielcin quailed.

They had a means to slay the monsters. All this time . . . all this time, and they’d concealed it.

“This way!” shouted Azhar.

I turned and—cursing—ran.

It was far to reach the ventral holds, as Olorin had said. The ventral cothon in which the escaped section of the *Mnemon* was docked was a huge crater sunk a hundred levels deep into the structure of *Aurora*, open to space

below. The ship itself—a strange, spiny-looking thing, like the skeleton of some fish about half a mile stem to stern—hung in its hollow heart, held in place by huge clamps, clamps I knew we would never get to disengage.

That did not matter then. Nothing mattered, except to reach the docking umbilical.

Aurora quaked beneath our feet, and the alarms screamed, so loud I thought my ears must bleed.

A shot lit the air ahead of us on fire.

Mere chance delivered me. I smelt burning hair—mine or Cassandra's, I could not say.

I had to leap behind a pilaster to cover myself.

The way forward was barred.

Almost at once a voice sounded in my ear. "I have you, old man," it sneered. "There is nowhere for you to go."

"Alexander." His voice was poison.

"Surrender," he said. "You'll never make it off this ship."

I did not answer him, watched as shots streamed past me down the hall. The Excubitors had gone ahead, fighting cheek by jowl with the mamluk slaves of Jadd. I could hear Captain Azhar shouting orders, his fellow aryabites returning fire.

There was no way out but through.

"He was *my* father." Alexander's voice shook.

Was.

William the Great was dead. I pressed shut my eyes. "Did you kill him?" We had left him and Doctor Vrabel nigh defenseless. Alexander's Martians might have overwhelmed what few Excubitors remained to guard the old Emperor. For all I knew, Alexander was there now, standing by the glass cage. I saw him at the piano, imagined him striking a key, one note repeating, echoing across eternity.

"You might have joined us," he said, "but that time has passed."

"Alexander," I snarled, "let me go. I can destroy the Cielcin. I can stop them here!" A shot caromed off the wall not six inches from my ear.

"For what?" he said. "What will that accomplish?"

Another shot struck the pilaster at my back, and all hope of answering the prince was driven from my mind. *For what?* His question echoed Yod. *For what?* The answers were too numerous, too obvious, too broad.

“Dorayaica is dead. You said so yourself. His army will collapse into pieces, and we will hunt them down ship by ship . . .” His voice shook. With fury? With delight? “You cannot imagine the power we have at our disposal. The things *we* can do.”

“We?” I said, unable to help myself. “The Order?”

A moment. “You know?”

“Of course I know,” I said. “The Chantry are mad, Alexander. They cannot hope to win! Dorayaica is dead, but a part of it remains in its god. As long as the Watchers remain, the Cielcin will follow them. They have to be destroyed!”

“They can’t be destroyed, Hadrian!” Alexander said. “You know that! Even if you kill the two here, you know there is no limit to their number! The others will see, they’ll come!” They were Yod’s words—almost precisely.

“I will end the war,” I said.

“You imbecile!” said he. “You’ll *declare* war! The universe is a *wilderness of tigers*, old man! You want to light a fire and tell every one of them where we are!”

I had no answer for him. I knew that he was right. I had already slain perhaps a dozen of the creatures when I carved the heart from Dharan-Tun, but lighting a star on fire was something else entirely. The light of that murdered sun would burn until the end of time, would blaze across eternity—the mark of a civilization come of age. Alexander was right—Yod was right. The universe *is* a wilderness of tigers. Of lions, of leopards, and wolves. Mankind was as a babe alone in that wilderness, abandoned by her unloving parents—naked and afraid. We were lost in darkness, afraid of that darkness, little understanding that darkness was the only protection we had. Fire might prove a weapon—had we the wit to wield it—but fire was more than a weapon.

It was a signal.

A lure.

Prometheus's gift—that dawn of civilization—was a poisoned one.

Lucifer and Prometheus are the same.

And yet the Absolute himself had set me on my path, delivered the weapons of the Mericanii into my hands. He who had made the universe, who recalled me twice to life. I had trusted him so far—trusted him all my life. Could I do less then? In that final hour?

“Hadrian!” Olorin's voice broke my near fugue, and looking up I saw the Prince of Jadd gesturing for me to follow. “We cannot stay here!”

I confess I only stood there, still reeling with the shock of Alexander's words. He meant to let the Cielcin win, to let them crush mankind into obscurity, so that in obscurity he and his masters—the lords of Earth—might endure.

“You coward,” I said.

“Coward!” Alexander laughed. “It's siege warfare, old man—on a larger scale!” When I said nothing, he pressed: “Your way will get us all killed.”

I'd had enough of our conversation. “We'll see.”

“You'll never sit the thr—”

I killed the comm.

“Hadrian!” said Kaim-Olorin again. “We can't get through!”

“Is there some other way?” I asked.

Nicephorus shook its head. “We have to pass this checkpoint! There's no way around!”

The Excubitors were holding, but the Martians in the guard embrasure up ahead were well defended, and there was no way to get around.

Our situation struck me once again, a sense of wild unreality. There I was—as Pallino might have said—the Emperor of all mankind, crouching in an arras in one corridor of the Imperial flagship, desperate to escape the thralls of my own false priests.

How had it come to this?

Cassandra and the Jaddians were pressed into the arrases just ahead of me while Azhar's men fired on the guard station up ahead.

I could leave, I realized. Stride across the space beyond time, come to

Mistwalker, perhaps, or *Tempest*. I was sure I could find them in the night. They could get me to *Demiurge*. I could still do what I'd been sent to do.

But I would abandon Nicephorus in doing so. Abandon Olorin. Abandon Cassandra . . .

Was that what I had been called to do?

The Emperor's rings were an unbearable burden, their weight greater than the weight of worlds, but greater still was the weight of the yoke the One had laid on me.

"Get out of my way," I said, rekindling my blade.

"What are you doing?" asked Nicephorus, eyes wide and hard.

"You stay there!" I said, and cast my coat upon the ground.

I limped a little as I took my first step. The day's horrors had taken their toll on me. I was battered, bruised, torn. It did not matter.

A shot struck my shield, and the projector pack wailed with alarm. I took another step, another, passed the place where Azhar crouched, his rifle leveled on the emplacement before us.

I did not flinch as a second shot struck me.

My shield screamed its last.

"Soldiers!" I roared, and silence fell.

"You know who I am?" I said.

"The prince!" said one of the Martians. "He said you killed the Emperor!"

Kosis had told a version of the same lie the minute we left the Emperor's side. "He was alive last I saw him," I said. "If he's dead now, it is not by my hand."

The Martians hesitated.

"The Excubitors fight with me," I said. "Who can command their loyalty?"

"The Excubitors are lackwits!" said the Martian. "You betrayed him!"

"Put down your guns, soldier," I said. "And I will spare your lives."

The man fired a shot in answer.

The bolt passed by me and through me.

I advanced another step. Another shot met me. Another shot missed. The

Martians panicked, kept firing. I heard the telltale chime of the lances' heat sinks overloading, the *ping* as tungsten cores were forcibly ejected.

"The doors!" shouted one. "Get the doors!"

The doors would only slow us down.

The shutters slammed before I could reach them.

Turning to the Excubitors, I said, "Cut the doors."

Two of them set to work at once, and Olorin said, "You know we may not be able to get the ship free."

"We just need to get to the ship." I had tried my terminal already. The signal was too weak. Or Yod's people were jamming me. "Can you get a message to the bridge?"

"Of *Aurora*?" Kaim-Olorin asked. "I can try, we—"

A wretched cry interrupted him, rising from the far side of the doors. Its sound was like nothing human, more beast than man.

"That was no *davos*," said Olorin, using the Jaddian word for *Cielcin*.

My eyes went to Cassandra, and by the horror on her face I knew the same shadow had fallen on her mind and memory as blackened mine. Then somewhere in the distance, around a corner—or so it seemed—I heard another sound, one more beautiful and more terrible than any scream.

A woman's laughter, ringing like bells.

Just then the door fell inward, but before my Excubitors could step through the breach, a man in the red of the Martian Guard hurled himself through unarmed, his hands outstretched. The Excubitors slashed him to pieces without thought.

"Forward!" I said, spurring the nearest of the Jaddians on. I clambered through the slashed airlock after my guards, found no resistance there. Most of the Martians that had been there had fled, and those that remained . . .

One lay dead upon the floor, his helm smashed to pieces. Another was disemboweled. A third torn limb from limb. There had hardly been time for such violence, and yet . . .

"She's here," said Cassandra.

Otomno muttered something I could not hear, and Ramanthanu clouted it in the back of its head.

“They . . . killed their own?” Olorin’s voice betrayed his shock.

“The god,” said the lop-horned captain. “He killed them.”

“She’s cleared the way for us,” I said. “We must not lose our chance. To the ship now!”

“What is this?” Olorin’s eyes were white in their gold frames. “Hadrian?”

“The Watcher . . .” I said. “She’s taken their minds. Come!”

The howling of men pursued us through the halls, mingled with the wailing of Cielcin. We had not far to go. The docking umbilical stretched before us: a bridge of glass and blackened steel reaching out over the bottomless pit of space from the cothon wall to what remained of *Mnemon*. We had only to reach it, to take that final turn . . .

Everything seemed so far away.

As we reached the gangway, two men exploded out of it, both Martians. One caught the foremost of my Excubitors and hurled it clean across the room. The homunculus struck the far wall as though it were a child’s doll hurled by an angry parent. Before the next Excubitor could respond, the Martian leaped upon it, knocked my praetorian flat on its back. The red man raised his hands like hammers, brought them down on the Excubitor’s chromium face.

The helmet broke apart like old bone, metal splintering, exposing the bent mechanisms enclosed beneath the fine material. And blood. And brain matter. Another blow and the creature’s head exploded. The Martian’s strength was incredible, a thing beyond nature. He looked at us, face hid behind his Corinthian helm, its gore-spattered surface reflecting the blue radiance of Ramanthanu’s blade as the captain swung.

Cassandra killed the other, reaching him before the Excubitors could adjust for the terror they had seen. She bellowed. Fearing for her, I called over the alarms. “To the ship!”

“What happened to them?” Olorin stood like a man in a fugue. “Why not us?”

“No time!” My shoulder burned as I whirled. “Ramanthanu! *Yelnaa!*”

The captain stood, lurched toward me.

I thought I saw something move out of the corner of my eye, saw only starlight reflected in the glass umbilical. Another cry seized my attention, and one of the Cielcin came around the corner, clutching a squealing *nahute* by its tail.

It was not alone.

“Now!” I shouted, pushing Nicephorus ahead of me through the archway. “Now! Now!”

“Get the prince out of here!” said Azhar, shouting in Jaddian. “*Dom Marlowe!*”

I had tarried on horror long enough.

The gangway shook beneath my feet, my reflection streaming to either side, echoing out across eternity, a legion of ghosts. Shots sounded in the gallery behind. Screams.

“My prince!” shouted one of the soldiers. “What is happening?”

“We are descended into hell!” said the prince, wheeling as he reached *Mnemon*’s gate. “We must get the Emperor to safety.”

“The Emperor?” the soldier looked round, confused, staring at Nicephorus, who shook its head.

I raised my right hand, displaying the Emperor’s rings. The guard’s eyes went wide. “*Noyn jitat!*”

“*Lugia!*” said Olorin, an admonition. “Tell the admiral we must depart at once.”

The man hurried to obey, vanishing within.

“We should close the hatch!” said Nicephorus, speaking from just inside the airlock.

Captain Azhar shook his head. “That’ll just increase the odds they’ll damage the hull—you saw what that Martian did to the Imperial guard!”

“We could destroy the umbilical,” I said. “Do any of you have a charge?” We could mine the umbilical, prevent Ushara’s thralls from reaching us.

The soldiers all shook their heads. “Find one!” I said. “Destroy the gangway!”

The noise of gunshots rang from the far end of the accessway, and I saw

the last of the Excubitors back into the gangway from the far end. “Cassandra!”

She was with them, a thousand feet away down the narrow corridor, Ramanthanu beside her. I saw her turn. “Now!”

She ran along the gangway with the xenobites close behind. “Hold the door!” I said to her on her approach, repeated my order for the benefit of the Excubitors.

“I’ll stay as well,” said Azhar, checking his gun.

Olorin hesitated, but he hurried within, and I followed him over the threshold.

All that remained of the once-great battleship *Mnemon* was little more than the bridge itself attached to an oversized fusion torch and a trio of warp-field projectors. There were lower decks—cramped, claustrophobic spaces unused except in times of emergency—that housed and supported the bridge crew. These contained the cubiculum, dormitories, small cabins for the admiral and the prince, and the meager life-support systems.

It was little more than a lifeboat, a raft to save those in command.

I prayed it would be enough to get us out of there.

Admiral Velkan Serpico—a white-haired Jaddian elder—sat in the captain’s seat, with its high, round back cushioned in red leather. He wore the white-and-blue Jaddian uniform, and turned his white-masked face to us.

“What under heaven is happening out there?” he said.

“The Empire is eating its own,” said Kaim-Olorin. “Prince Alexander has taken control of the ship. He may have killed the Emperor.”

“God of Fire . . .” The old admiral clambered to his feet. “His own father?”

“The Red Emperor named Lord Marlowe his successor.”

“He . . .” Serpico looked at me, eyes wide in his masked face. “What?”

Olorin dismissed this question like a cloud of gnats. “We have to get him off this ship. The Cielcin are aboard, and the prince’s faction want him dead . . .” He looked over his shoulder, back in the direction of the airlock. “And there is something else, I sense. Some evil is afoot . . .” I could see

him reliving the moment the Martian had shattered the Excubitor's armor. "Azhar is holding the door with the Maeskolos."

The Maeskolos could only be Cassandra. I felt a surge of pride.

"We must cast off."

"Caesar?" Serpico was still looking at me, utterly aghast.

Nicephorus had entered behind me, and said, "By the Emperor's word and will."

"It does not matter," I said, focusing my attention on the foreign admiral. "What matters is that I've the means to stop the Pale. You *must* take me to *Demiurge*. Now." As if to punctuate my words, the noise of gunfire rushed in from the airlock behind.

"We're locked in," said Velkan Serpico. "The clamps—"

"Won't hold if you go to full burn."

"Full burn!" Serpico looked horrified. "We're as like to tear the roof off the ship trying that sort of maneuver!"

I hardly hesitated to offer my prescription: "Then go to warp."

"Warp!" Serpico's response twinned a shot from the gangway that made Nicephorus flinch. "You would have us declare war on *the Empire*?"

"I *am* the Empire!" I said.

"You're a fugitive!" Serpico snarled, mask clicking. "What you are suggesting . . . is a war crime."

"War *is* crime, Admiral," I said. "If you do not do as I say, this war will *never* end." I heard Cassandra cry out from the airlock, felt wires wind tight about my heart. "They will kill us if we stay."

Kaim-Olorin laid a hand on his admiral's shoulder. "I have already raised my hand against them."

"There is a chance we could destroy the ship," Serpico said, "if we do what Marlowe suggests."

"Their lives are already forfeit," I said. "If we do not act, everyone here will die."

"*Our* ship!" said Serpico.

I shook my head. "It won't," I said. "I've done this before." Valka and I had attempted a variation on this maneuver when we had escaped

Akterumu, forming *Ascalon's* warp bubble as we escaped the hulk of *Tamerlane*.

Olorin's eyes were on me, twin chips of obsidian in a mask as polished and dark. "You are certain of this?"

"You gave me an order, when you charged me to seek Vorgossos," I said, speaking as quickly as I could. "*Bring light*, you told me. That is what I intend to do: Bring light . . . and *fire* for the Cielcin. I—" I faltered, looked from Serpico to Olorin to Nicephorus.

It was Nicephorus who realized what I had realized first.

"It's quiet," it said, looking round in sudden fear. I left the prince and the admiral there, pushed past Nicephorus to reach the door. "Cassandra!"

"They just . . . stopped," she said.

I joined her by the door, peering past the mamluks and the few remaining members of the Knights Excubitor.

Three men stood at the end of the hall, each a Martian tall and thin. They simply stood there, unmoving.

"It's her," I said. "We need to blow the gangway."

Just then, a lamp exploded in the wall at my back. I whirled, not sure what to expect, saw glass falling, dust and vapor on the air. Another lamp exploded, and I threw my good hand across my face to shield my eyes. Then a terrible scream went up, issuing not from the haunted figures of the Martians at the far end of the gangway, but from the corridor at my left, back in the direction of the bridge. A soldier—one of the prince's own—was rushing at me, face disfigured in a rictus of terror and rage and glee. He screamed, and screamed and screamed, lips peeled back from square teeth. Another lamp exploded, and the man's face was cut. Still on he came, shrieking, hands stretched out.

Azhar fired his weapon, but the bullet struck nothing but air. The screamer drew nearer, and as he did, he seemed to grow, and as he grew, he faded—became insubstantial as a phantom, as smoke.

Then he was gone, and his scream—which had filled the corridor like a trumpet—retreated as down some hallway infinitely long.

There was no escape but warp. Light after light exploded down the

corridor, circuits bursting with the light of her presence. I saw her twisted reflection in the glass, her face like poison, her beauty abolished by hate.

Then a fresh phantom flickered through the hall, a new shadow fell, and a figure tall and terrible lurched out of thin air, its crooked blade shining as it flashed toward Cassandra. It was one of the Cielcin, descending from that higher place, pushed or carried by Ushara. Cassandra's blade answered it, and the xenobite fell dead.

"The god!" Ramanthanu roared.

Shadows were moving on the walls, shifting as the light from higher dimensions changed, cast by figures not wholly present, enemies even my eyes could not plainly see. The ship was full of ghosts, would soon be filled with dead men.

On the bridge, a woman screamed. One of the soldiers in Azhar's platoon shot himself. I froze, saw the man's body fall, a hole clean through the side of his head.

"Kinsman!" a man's voice roared, rich with the accents of Jadd. He was calling for me. "Where are you? Kinsman!"

"Bahram!" another voice was shouting. "It's Bahram! He killed Roshar!"

"They're coming!" Azhar cursed, wheeled to put his attention on the door.

"Kinsman!" A man staggered into view, bleeding from his face. He gripped the frame of the door that led back into the bridge, hung there a moment, his tunic soaked with blood. His nose was broken, his teeth smashed, blood ran down from a tear in his forehead, as though he had run face first into solid stone. "Think you that you had killed me?" he said, leering. "Think you that you can?"

I turned to face the man—and the devil in him. "You are just a memory."

"I am a god!" He licked his lips, tasted his own blood. As he spoke, another voice spoke with him, a shadow to every word he said. "*Zirdol ascha.*"

"You died, Dorayaica," I said. "I was there."

"You cannot destroy us!" he said, lurching toward me. "We are older

than time!”

“*Ge im granra ras cocan.*”

“We are without number!”

“*Ge im corfa chisga.*”

A blade—pale as sunfire—sprouted from the man Bahram’s chest. He fell, blade carving through him as he did so.

His teeth were bared in a rictus of delight, red with blood.

Olorin stood in the door, his mask removed, face visibly shaken.

“If we do not go now,” I said to him. “We will never go.”

He nodded mutely, made a gesture in the direction of the bridge. *Mnemon* began to whine beneath our feet.

More gunfire issued from the gangway, and I heard Ramanthanu shout. Captain Azhar was leaning against the frame, his gun trained along the passage of the umbilical, where a dozen men at least lay dead. Still more were coming. At their head, a man—another Martian by his kit, though he had cast aside his helm, and his face was slashed as if by some ravening beast—clambered over the wall of bodies, his arms bloody to the elbow.

A Cielcin came just behind him, scimitar in hand.

The Martian slowed, and the Cielcin joined him, so that the two advanced together, side by side.

My Excubitors still held the door, shields up, blades ready. None had reached them yet.

Azhar fired. His shot was true. Struck the Martian in the face. The man did not stagger, or stumble or fall. The bullet passed through him as though he were water—though he and the Cielcin stopped, each cocking their heads in unison. The same motion. The same angle.

“Where’s the man with the charge?” I asked Azhar, received no answer. Hissing, I shouldered my way to the door, heedless of my pain. “Close the doors!” If the noise from *Mnemon*’s engines was any indication, we had no time at all.

Then Azhar laughed, and Cassandra flinched away from him. I had to catch her wrist to stop her from slaying him. Despite his laughter, Azhar stood. His fingers found the controls for the outer hatch.

“Fall back!” I shouted, watching as the last of the Excubitors were driven back across the threshold by that horde of Martians and Cielcin mingling.

The hatch closed like a curtain coming down, and a moment later fists fell upon the door like thunder. I just stood there, watching the hatch, waiting. Waiting. Azhar was still laughing—had fallen to the floor. Cassandra looked at me, hand tight on the hilt of her sword. I shook my head, begging her for patience. I could still see Bahram’s corpse leering, smell the ozone of the shattered lamps bitter on the air, while beneath my feet *Mnemon* whined to new life.

As if in answer, we—all of us—heard a terrible scream. A shadow lurched off the wall near the hatch, became a shape—a man’s shape, or manlike. It lurched toward Cassandra, hand outstretched. She slashed at it, found only air. A moment later it resolved, sharpened, became one of the Pale. Ramanthanu leaped at it, knocking its kinsman to the deck. The shadows on the wall—cast by objects no living eye could see—came off the wall then, and Olorin said, “There are faces!”

I saw them. Men and Cielcin, each black as if with soot, eyes bright as fire. I felt a hand close about my wrist, and turning saw my own face smiling at me out of the darkness, smile wider than any smile should be.

Then *Mnemon* lurched, and a squealing, tearing, cracking din of tortured metal filled the world as the Jaddian ship wrenched itself free of the Imperial grasp and went spiraling, *spiraling* out into the night.

The shadows vanished, cut by the folding of space, leaving only blood and trailing limbs behind. Arms hung from the ceiling, and the body of a man—a common legionnaire—hung from the bulkhead, his flesh grafted to the steel.

Captain Azhar had gone silent.

No one dared move.

An arm lay on the floor before me, palm pressed against the surface, elbow flowing into steel.

Cassandra made a sound, dropped her sword.

A pool of black was spreading from Ramanthanu. “Out of the way!” I

said, heedless of the madness around me, eyes then only for my fallen soldier. I turned it over, saw the wound on its neck. "It's been bitten," I said, sure the wound was too small to have been made by a Cielcin. "We need to get it to medica, as soon as we get on board." I looked round, saw Adraiano Azhar seated, almost catatonic, at the foot of the wall. "Is there a medic on board?"

Olorin answered. "I'll see what I can find." He turned to go in a daze.

Ramanathanu's pulse was gone, its blood black upon the floor, upon its face. There was nothing I could do. I could not restart its hearts, or force the blood back into its veins. Otomno was looking at us, transported by emotions I could but partially comprehend.

It was alone in that moment, but for Darathama. The sole Cielcin to serve the Quiet and not the dark gods of its sister-brothers.

It was alone.

Alone.

"It was coming for me . . ." Cassandra said, voice very, very small. "It was coming for me."

"I know," I said, standing, and restored my sword to its hasp.

"It saved me," she was saying, "Ramanathanu, it—"

"I know," I said again, gathering her to myself. "Come here." I held her close, kept holding her, even as the medical team clambered over the carnage from deeper inside the ship to kneel beside the injured and the dying and our ship hurtled ever deeper into the chasm of night.

CHAPTER 82

NIGHTFALL

TALL TOWERS REACHED DOWN toward us like grasping fingers, their tops like claws, while upon their ramparts and between them and along the terraces from which they clung, vast armies marched. Whole legions of statues stood in formation. Men and devils, monsters and gods, as though some antique kingdom were turned all to stone.

“You said it was Kharn Sagara’s machine that designed this ship?” asked Kaim-Olorin, standing by the *Mnemon* remnant’s forward window. “The Mericanii machine?”

“It did,” I said.

“It is beautiful,” he said, and shook his masked head. “Why would a machine build such a thing?”

The truth was that Brethren was no simple machine. The monster’s human parts still craved beauty, still admired art, and though the beauty of the dread ship was a thing of horror, too . . . it was still beautiful.

“They are what we are,” I said at last. “What we made them.”

Olorin grunted, but said no word.

Demiurge hung in the dark between Cynon and the ruin of Gododdin, far enough from the rest of the fighting to avoid detection. Its unique geometries protected it from the Watchers’ pitiless gaze—rendered it almost invisible from the space beyond time—and it gave off very little heat, reflected almost no light.

“It is beautiful,” I said. “It’s almost easy to forget what it really is.”

“How long will it take?” the prince asked, “Once the weapon is deployed?”

“How long before the star collapses, you mean?” I turned to look at him, “We can’t be sure. Minutes, or days.”

Kaim's face darkened. "We don't have days."

"I know that," I said, and clasped my left hand with the right, feeling the Emperor's rings bite into me.

Seeing the gesture, the prince asked, "Is William truly dead?"

I felt a grimace take my face. "He was alive when I left him, but he was very weak."

In making the leap from *Aurora* to *Demiurge*, we had jumped far enough that the light of our escape had not yet reached us. It was possible we had destroyed the ship completely, and so it was possible that I had killed William myself. And Alexander. And every man and woman and androgyn upon *Aurora*.

Neither one of us wanted to say it. It was an act of war, a declaration of war—Jadd against the Imperium—if news of it ever left Gododdin system. "Do you think the prince will have killed him?"

"The boy would not dare," said Nicephorus. The androgyn had removed its flaking makeup, stood barefaced by the empty captain's chair.

"But the Chantry . . ." I said. *The Inner Order. The Shadow Kingdom. The Princes of Earth . . .*

"Do you think they gave your Caesar his disease?" asked Kaim-Olorin.

There was a question that had not occurred to me. I weighed the thought in my hand—dropped it like a stone. "They had no need. With"—could I still say *the Emperor*?—"with William on the frontier . . . it was only a matter of time."

A curse tore from the Prince of Jadd.

"They have to be destroyed, Olorin," I said. "If that means destroying Earth itself—"

"My prince!" the helmsman interjected. "We have an approach vector for the docking bay. Estimated time to contact: two minutes, seventeen seconds."

Kaim-Olorin turned in a whirl of peacock feathers and black samite. "*Bashah, Wagram*," he said. "Take us in."

The bay lay along the midline of the mighty warship, its equator, at a place not far from the foremost ring section. I could see the spinning drum

where the Danuans had established themselves above the waters of the fishery: its exterior a mass of arched colonnades and embossed paneling. The doors themselves showed a scene from some apocalypse: a dragon writhing amid a city of square towers. They opened horizontally, and light spilled out, as though a wound opened in the vessel's side. Within, I could see the gantries and catwalks and the clamps opening to receive us as what remained of *Mnemon* slowed down and passed through the static field.

A lone figure stood on the walkway above us, her long red hair floating on the wind of our arrival.

Selene was waiting on the strand.

When we docked, I went to her, each footstep a crack of thunder on the hard metal floor. Cassandra and Nicephorus followed, and when the Excubitors emerged from the vessel at my back, I saw her face turn white, and a hand went to the choker she wore.

"My father?" she asked, then, "Hadrian, your arm!"

"I'm all right," I said as she nestled against me, and laid my hand upon her shoulder. "Selene. Your father . . ."

She was stiff as stone. "He's dead," she said, voice very far away. "Isn't he?"

"He may be," I said, and lifted her face to mine. I needed her to hear me, needed her to understand. Her eyes were shining, raw. "Amon Kosis and the Chantry freed your brother. He has control of *Aurora*. By now, he probably has control of the fleet. If he is not dead himself."

"Alexander?" Her brows knit, emerging from beneath the red hair that hid her forehead.

"Dorayaica is dead," I said. "But the Watchers remain. The Cielcin fleet will start to shake itself apart. I have to end this. Now. Before it is too late."

She pressed her face against my hand, as though drawing strength from the warmth of it. I did not pull away. "Your hand—" She drew away herself, having spied the glint of gold. She seized my fingers in her own. "Father's rings . . ." Her mouth fell open. "He gave them to you?"

A lord's rings were more than rings. They were everything. The flaws in each ruby, each garnet, each square-cut diamond contained whole libraries

of information. My Marlowe house signet had contained all my small inheritance: the access codes to my personal accounts, copies of the deeds to my private holdings, my genome and pedigree.

Who could say what secrets there were resident in the Emperor's rings?

What doors might they unlock? What paths might they reveal?

"Selene." Lord Nicephorus stepped forward, a pained smile on its face. "Your father . . . he has named Lord Marlowe Emperor."

"He . . ." Selene looked at me mouth open, eyes at once alight with . . . surprise?

Relief.

She took my right hand in both of hers, and bending fell against me, her head against my chest. "Emperor?" Her face went suddenly grave. "You?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad." A nervous laugh. She turned aside, hand like cold iron in mine. "I was not made to rule."

How nobile that profile. Her hair so long and shining, cut straight above her eyes as with highmatter. Her bright eyes. Those full lips. She might have adorned every coin from the core to the outer rim.

"Neither was I," I said at last. "But we do not choose our challenges. Only how we answer them."

Neither of us would rule. My face would no more adorn our coinage than would Selene's. The Chantry knew what I intended. The Emperor's chamber had been bugged, and even if our escape from *Aurora's* ventral cothon had devastated the flagship or destroyed it, word of what I intended was sure to have escaped the vessel.

And even if Prince Alexander were dead—as I then prayed—it would not matter.

That serpent, Leviathan, had two heads at least.

If *Ararat* had survived the Cielcin onslaught, or *Socompa*, or *Keilir*—any of the Chantry warships—they would harden the galaxy against me. The truth was that I knew I would *never* sit the Solar Throne. Though I annihilate a thousand suns, burn ten thousand words—destroy Mother Earth herself—I could not take it. To try and take it would mean war unending.

It did not matter. Not then.

My seat lay not on ruined Forum, or on Avalon, or Old Earth.

My throne was before me—above me—on the bridge.

“What is it?” asked Princess Selene. The Empress-Consort. My *wife*.

I looked at her—my destiny, that destiny I had never asked for, never wanted. I smiled.

“It’s nothing,” I said, and that was a lie. I was conscious of Nicephorus’s presence then, and Cassandra’s presence—and Valka’s shade. If I was to say anything, I felt I must say it then, though millions hung in the balance. “I have been cruel to you. I am sorry. But I swear: You need never leave my side again. I will protect you—whatever comes after. I promise.”

She was still standing so close to me, my white shadow. The scent of jasmine perfumed her straightened hair. She had changed out of the gown she’d worn when we’d walked in the garden, donned once more the white hose and white bolero, and her belt of golden coins. She tried to smile—or to stop herself from smiling—and tucked a curtain of her flaming hair behind one jeweled ear.

Stooping then, I kissed her on the brow, held her fast a moment. “To whatever end, my lady.”

“Selene,” she said. “Only Selene.”

Hand lifting her chin, I kissed her mouth, and drawing back, said, “Come with me, Selene.”

My time had come.

I led our procession—a long and narrow column of men and women and cloned slaves—through the black ship from the docking bay to the bridge, and though we passed through the ring section, over the township the Danuans had claimed for their own, and climbed up the tower section toward the bridge and bowsprit . . . in my mind the journey seemed a *descent*.

The steps that led from Devil’s Rest down, down, down to our necropolis unrolled before my feet—square-hewn things of black stone that turned to rude white as we reached the limestone caverns that veined the rock of the mountain beneath my father’s castle. Water ran in little rivulets

on stone, dripped from stalactites made columns by the passage of eternity into pools where blind fish dwelled. My father went before me, carrying the ashes of his mother—my grandmother—in a black-figure urn. My mother—the lone figure in white—went behind him, her veil guttering like a candle flame. Then went Uncle Lucian, who died himself thereafter, carrying the jar that housed my grandmother’s brain. Crispin carried her heart—already a sign of father’s favor—while it fell to me to carry her eyes, unblinking, down into the underworld.

One of them peered sightlessly at me the entire time, its iris robbed of color by the azure fluid in which it hung.

In that hour, it was I who could not blink, or falter, or turn aside.

No water ran on the walls of *Demiurge*, nor blind fish swam. No gulls cried in her black halls and silent corridors. But for ourselves and the *uthras*—those daimons without number—nothing moved. The battle that raged across the chasm of night outside was far away, and the eyes of the Watchers were blind to the doom that came to Gododdin.

And my hands were empty, empty and clean.

This must be.

The shadows of Kharn’s hermaphrodites loomed over the final stair, their swords drawn, their wings spread, their forms full-breasted and erect. It was as though they were there to welcome my ascension—to herald my descent.

Were they angels? Or demons?

What was the difference?

Only duty.

The huge doors parted like curtains of metal and stone, and light—the light of my murdered sun—streamed down upon my face. Our journey had not brought us down to Hades, to the Halls of Dust where the dead wail and gnash their teeth. As Alexander in the parable I told Cassandra at Annica, we stood at the gates of paradise, before the doors of the Empyrean itself. Deep shadows there were carved in the air before me: darkness visible, tangible, all too real.

Shadows I might have taken in my hand like spears.

I emerged from behind the throne, leading Selene and Cassandra, Olorin and Nicephorus, and my Excubitors. Orphan was waiting, standing ready beside the pilot's throne, its heads bowed, its faces grave. Seeing that I was clad only in my suit underlayment, the giant unslung its cloak and, bowing, draped the garment over my shoulders, so that the coils of the golden dragon-serpent embroidered there embraced me.

An image like the image of Miudanar. A dragon to slay a dragon.

Neema was there, his face almost green with fear. And there was Edouard—standing below the dais by the well, one hand upon the icon of the god he worshipped. Even old Argo was there, his restored eyes hard, his hair and beard a tangle. And there were Annaz, and Rizhaa, and several of the Irchtani beside.

Everyone was present, there to witness the end of days.

Exhausted, I settled onto the black throne, realizing as I did so that I had never sat in that chair before.

“Are we ready?” The moment the words escaped my lips, I realized that I had heard them before. The *exact* words. The *precise* intonation. I leaned forward into the light, realized as I did so that that, too, I had foreseen. Orphan had turned our ship to face the sun, so that its shining face could be seen straight ahead—a distant jewel made dark by the daimons in the window glass.

Dark enough to see.

The Quiet had shown me this moment, aeons ago, reflected in the black stone of the mountain atop Annica—that highest place. I froze for a moment, in that moment—the revelation, recognition, understanding a shock.

Had it all been fate, after all? All *his* providence? His plan from the start?

Had I no choice in the matter? No freedom to choose?

Ten million times I'd failed, in ten million universes that never were.

Was my being there not brute force? Not the wearing down of the mountain of my iniquity by progressive failure? Life after life? Reading after reading?

And yet it was *not* the moment of my vision. Not entirely. I had never seen Orphan there. Nor Olorin. Nor Nicephorus or Selene. Some things were different. Some things I'd changed. I hesitated, regarded my daughter; my consort; the towering, two-headed giant. I *had* shaped the future, *participated* in its shaping.

Had I not participated freely? Had I felt myself a slave?

Was I not there, in that seat, because I knew what must be *must be*?

"Aye sir," said Edouard, his words evoking ancient memory. "But . . . are you certain?"

Do what must be done. Those were the words I was meant to say.

I opened my mouth to speak them, but hesitated. In the vision, the other Hadrian had turned his gaze to the right, to look at the place where I'd stood—watching him. I could not stop myself, and turned as he had turned, half expecting to see my younger self standing there in dented plate in the shadow of the pillar at the base of the stair.

But there was no one. No other Hadrian standing there, unseen by all but me.

Still, I felt his presence. It was his memory that made me turn, present or no.

I smiled, recalled that I had smiled in my vision, too.

Do what must be done.

I had only to say the words.

Could I not say them? Was I free?

"Orphan," I said, and stood—breaking the vision in my hands. "Prepare to fire *Astrophage*."

Would you have him be a tyrant? Ragama's voice—so warm and melancholy—sounded in my ear. *Deny you the freedom to choose?*

I was free, had been free all my life.

Gibson was right. Had been right. How had I doubted it? Doubted him?

Only the past is written.

Only the past.

I seized the hem of Kharn's robe with my right hand, felt the Emperor's rings like lead weights. I had the right, had been given the authority—by the

Emperor and the Lord of Emperors—to do what must be done. Yet why should the choice still taste of poison?

I had the right.

As Emperor of Man, as Prince of the Pale, and Instrument of the Absolute.

A pawn no more . . .

At my command, the centimanus retook its throne, restored the electrodes to its brows with three long-fingered hands. Edouard was standing by the holograph, which showed an image of the star system in chalky red light, an image all but annihilated by the light streaming through the forward window.

“Does not your god call for sacrifice?” I asked him.

“Once upon a time,” said Edouard stiffly, “before he offered one himself.”

I understood the boy’s objections. I felt them my own self. But the Cielcin had already destroyed the planet, and the fleet was a nest of vipers. My way was straight, the path clear over level ground. “What I do,” I said, “I do for peace.”

“I know that,” said the adorator. “But there are some battles, Lord Marlowe, that we must lose—or lose ourselves.”

“You know this is not one of them.”

Edouard’s hand closed about his crucifix. “I know that I know nothing,” he said, misquoting Socrates, “but if it really is my god that sent you, I know he writes straight with crooked lines.”

That drew a smile from me, and I brushed past him. “It is not your god that sent me.”

“My lord,” said he, calling after me, “then it is no god at all.”

I acknowledged this with a raised hand, my shadow stretching out behind me like wings, like the finger of a sundial.

Operation Gnomon . . . I thought, and said, “Prepare to fire on my mark.”

“Understood,” said Orphan.

And Orphan said, “Yes, my master.”

I wanted to see it . . . when it happened. I would not be moved from the spot.

If Yod was right, if this was to be man's declaration to the stars and to all the powers over them, then I would make it unflinching.

And yet . . . and yet . . . what if Yod was right? The light of that day would blaze across eternity, an unmistakable beacon. Other powers there are in creation, other races, other empires. Powers to shame the Cielcin, perhaps powers to shame the Watchers themselves. Who can say? Not I, for though I have plunged into the depths beyond time and beneath it—I have not seen the bottom. Like Alexander at the gates of Eden, I had been given a fig from the Tree of Knowledge. Like Alexander, I had not eaten—only held the fruit in my hand. Unlike Alexander, I had not gone away laughing, for the juice of it and the oil burned my hands. And the truth . . .

The truth . . .

My hands clenched, the Emperor's rings grinding against one another like the scales of a dragon.

"This . . . is the end," I said, speaking not to those there gathered—those reflected in the glass before me—speaking only to the one who sent me. "The day is done. Night falls . . ." What would the night bring? Darkness? Silence?

Or the light of stars?

The Age of Miracles . . .

"Is this really what you want of me?"

No answer came then from on high. No word, no sign, no vision of fire.

When you call for it . . . Dorayaica's words—its broken lips—moved in my mind. *It will be Quiet.*

But I knew the answer, had heard it long before.

I knew what I must do.

"Then by your hand and mine . . ." I whispered—a final prayer—and turned my head. I raised my ringed right hand, and in a voice loud and clear and sharp as memory, I said the fated words: "Fire at will."

This must be.

"Firing," said Orphan, pressing controls on the arms of its throne. I

heard a click, a snap—as of a key breaking. The sound of fingers on keys.

“Firing.”

The signal went faster than light, carried by the ghostly action of the telegraph. The instant Orphan sent the signal, the weapon itself received it, despite its being more than a light-hour away. At once then, the mechanisms the American machines had built so long ago began their dreadful work.

A little black spot dove into the sun’s corona, a black knife of a vessel less than a hundred cubits long. The rings that comprised her rear section began to turn, counterrotating, an armillary like the body of Ushara herself. Faster they spun, and faster still, exerting their eldritch influence upon the quantum foam itself, twisting the very fabric of space and time as a harlot crushes her bedclothes in her fists, while all the while the black vessel plunged through seas of plasma, growing hotter, and hotter, and hotter.

Then it happened: The twisting of space intensified, and a tear appeared. A seed and grain of darkness small as the smallest atom, smaller than the head of a pin. There demons danced, and the rings that held it stable turned ever faster, clawing at reality itself as the heat of the star fed it, nursed it, prevented its collapse. The weapon dove deeper still, passing through the supergiant’s photosphere, where temperatures soared to more than ten thousand degrees above absolute zero.

But the American machine had been made to withstand such temperatures, was built of tungsten and ceramic and of materials stranger still, the whole thing insulated by layers of vacuum. It needed only to hold for a matter of minutes, for long enough to stabilize the singularity it spun out of nothing at all. For that, the tear needed the star on which it fed, needed its mass, its prime material.

The hole the weapon made in the fabric of creation was so small it should have dissolved at once, but with each passing moment, the hole grew larger, drinking deep of the substance of the star itself. The hotter it grew and the larger, the stabler the black hole became, so that the heat and pressure and density of the star itself made possible its undoing. It was a work of sublime and diabolic genius, reliant on laws and principles beyond the reach of men.

At some point, that same heat and pressure would prove enough to destroy the ship itself, but by then . . . the process was complete, the singularity large enough and hot enough to survive in its environ.

A tear in reality itself, a dark star within the bright one. Eating, eating, growing larger. Deeply it drank of that stellar fire, and grew as it drank, so that with each passing moment, the rate of collapse accelerated.

The seed had flowered.

The egg hatched.

About the circles of that dying star, the battle still raged, its combatants—save a few—unaware of the terrible change that had taken place.

“How long?” I asked, not taking my face from the sight before me.

My star.

It was magnificent, a splendorously shining daughter of the Cataclysm, a thing vast and old beyond the comprehension of man. It was young for a star, I knew, born mere tens of millions of years before the advent of man. It might have burned for millions more. It had been part of the Sagittarine Arm—so the scholiasts all said—had been ejected from that gleaming river aeons past, hurled with all its planets into the gulf by the action of some passing supermassive black hole, along with several of its kindred, so that they made a kind of road—a gleaming filament—from one arm of the galaxy to the next.

“We cannot say,” came Orphan’s answer.

“We cannot know.”

I could make out the bruises on the sun’s surface, see the solar flares arcing—the prominences—obeying unseen lines of force. Red and orange and yellow gold. Bronze. Brass. Rust. Saffron. Vermillion. Orpiment. Ochre. Umber. Sable. A dazzling array of swirling color, never still.

“Did it work?” asked Cassandra.

There was no answer.

But I knew. We had come so far—through so much—the Absolute would not let us fail. Not at the uttermost brink of doom.

“We won’t know for an hour or so at minimum,” said Edouard.

For all we knew, the sun was already dead, its eruption already occurred.

“It may take hours more,” said Orphan.

“Send a telegraph to *Mistwalker*,” I said, and hesitated. Was Lorian still alive? He had trained his guns on Miudanar when the beast had risen from Dharan-Tun’s crippled corpse. The beast might have destroyed them. “Tell Lorian . . . tell him to take his people to safety.”

When the blast came, its first wave would be a flash. The wave of radiation would extinguish every machine in the system, overwhelm every shield, wipe clean every mechanism even as it slew every living thing. Including Ushara, and Miudanar himself.

The fire would come after, a wave of plasma and molten metal, a flower blooming across tens of millions of miles of space. Hundreds. Thousands.

For generations to come, men would look up and see the flash as it reached new and distant solar systems, until at last the whole galaxy knew what it was I had done. The funeral pyre of the Cielcin race would blaze for a hundred million years.

“We should sound a general retreat,” said Kaim-Olorin, his reflection a dark specter in the glass.

I bowed my head. “We risk revealing ourselves to the Cielcin. Every one of them that escapes . . . and the Watchers . . .”

I did not have to say it.

I saw Selene’s shadow touch the black silk band that held the cameo at her throat, but it was Edouard who spoke. “You mean to sacrifice the fleet?” I could hear his anguish. “All of them?”

“We must stop them here,” I said, and drew Kharn’s cloak tight about myself, wincing as the pain in my shoulder flared. “If not here . . .”

“There must be more than a billion men left in the system!” Edouard protested. “Sollans! Jaddians! Normans and the rest! The Mandari! The—”

“I know, Albé!” I said, shouting for the first time. The young man had come round the holography well, stood with fists both clenched, arms stiff at his sides. I turned my back on him. “You think I don’t know?”

“This is madness!” the boy exclaimed. “It is murder!”

“It is war,” I said, deadly calm. “Every one of those men knew they might not survive.”

“They didn’t know you would kill them!”

“They were dead already,” I said. “You know what we are up against, what will happen if we fail.”

Edouard let out an anguished sound, advanced a step. I saw Cassandra’s reflection seize him by the arm. “That does not give you the right to—”

“You’re right,” I said, and raised my right hand, showcasing the Emperor’s rings, “but this does.”

“You are not the Emperor,” he said. “And even the Emperor cannot do evil to do good. Evil is evil, Hadrian.”

“Evil?” I said, and turned at last. There were tears on my face. “All my choices are evil, Edouard. The Cielcin are right about that. What would you have me do? Sit idly by?”

Cassandra drew a little nearer the young officer, moved her hand from his wrist to his shoulder. She was standing very near to him, her face almost in his hair.

“You know who it is that sent me,” I said. “My god is not your god, but he is the author of all things. If he has declared that I must do a thing, then I must do it. I have done it. It is done.” My eyes found Orphan, seated stone faced and smiling on its throne. “Alert Strategos Lin as well . . .” I looked to Olorin. “Send one of your men back down to Serpico, have him contact your people. Tell them they must flee for their lives.”

Edouard blinked. Confusion. Relief.

My expression softened. “I’ve no intention of letting our people die,” I said. “But we must not show our hand. Enough of the fleet must remain, else the Watchers may learn our intent.”

“The ships that remain . . .” Nicephorus spoke up. “The prince’s?”

“Yes,” I said to the tall androgyn, “if it can be helped.”

If the Chantry and the Martian forces could be made to bear the brunt of what was coming . . . “You would destroy all your enemies at a stroke,” said the Lord Chamberlain. Was that . . . respect in those cold, green eyes?

“What of my father?” Selene’s voice was like spun glass underfoot.

She was standing apart from the others, her arms tight across her chest.

“He intended to stay behind,” I said. “That was before your brother moved to take over the ship.”

“Do we know the fate of *Aurora*?” asked Kaim-Olorin, eyes turning on the giant in the pilot’s chair. “How far are we from Cynon?”

“Nearly eighteen minutes by photon,” said Orphan.

The light of our departure from Cynon ought to have reached us by then . . . I returned my attention to the window, to the dying sun outside. I had forgotten Alexander, absorbed as I was by the task at hand. I waited for Orphan’s pronouncement.

“The ship remains,” said the black-haired one. “I detect its beacon.”

I shut my eyes. That *Aurora* remained meant Alexander was—most likely—still alive. On the other hand, that the ship remained in-system might mean William was alive as well, and that Adar Rice had maintained control of the vessel in the face of Lord Amon’s treachery.

Pandora’s Emperor . . . I thought. Living or dead.

“Can you get an image?” I asked.

The air thrummed with the distinctive resonance of repulsors as the silverfish projectors swam, stitched an image on the air, a window of light. It showed gray Cynon, *Aurora* splayed flat against her face, a broad arrowhead of gilt and blackened steel.

A ragged wound ran its length perhaps ten degrees from straight, so that the lower decks were laid bare in a line from midsection to starboard bow.

The mark of our escape.

But the ship had survived, and Leviathan . . .

Demiurge lurched beneath my feet, shook as if with earthquake. Seeming far above our heads and far below our feet, the deep alarm bells rang.

Orphan howled, clenched the arms of its seat with all three hands. “We are attacked!”

“Our shields endure!”

“What?” Nicephorus’s face was pale. “The Cielcin?”

Edouard hurried to the well, which—under the direction of Orphan’s will—changed from an image of the system as a whole to display only local

space. *Demiurge*—at first a point like a mote of dust—became a cigar shape in the center of the projection.

Not quite a million miles away, a star appeared on the image. A shape like an arrowhead.

“Alert: Directed energy weapons detected!” It was the voice of *Demiurge* itself, cool and calm. The bells were ringing, filling the air. The attack had come at light speed, the moment the attacker appeared.

They had warped to reach us, struck so that their light arrived just as their attack did.

“What’s happening?” asked Selene.

Cassandra was at my side. “It’s them,” she said.

Before she could clarify, Orphan’s castrato made its announcement. “It is *Ararat*!” it exclaimed.

I looked at the holograph, at the image of *Aurora* still in orbit over Cynon. Was that *Ararat* behind it? That black castle of a ship? That rootless mountain? It could have been any of the Chantry vessels, but the fact remained . . . that light was minutes old.

Fifteen minutes? Twenty?

So it appeared to be in two places at once.

“There is a transmission!” said the castrato.

And the basso spoke, “They have launched atomics against us!”

“Do not accept transmission!” I said. “They will set a daimon on us!”

“Fire to intercept!” said Edouard. “Deploy countermeasures!”

A million miles was not far. A little more than five seconds’ distance as the photon flew. The barrage would be on us in minutes. Our shields might blunt the impact of the Imperial atomics, but the radiation? No shield could bear that much.

“We should depart!” cried Orphan, speaking to my own thoughts.

“But the others!” Cassandra said. “Your man, Lin! The Supreme Commandant!”

The Jaddians . . . I looked to Kaim-Olorin. “Did you tell your people to flee?”

He nodded. “Azhar sent the telegraphs.”

Lorian! Lorian!

“Bassander . . .” I snarled.

“We should kill them,” Cassandra said. “Destroy the ship.”

Her words were like lead shot through my chest.

“Return fire!” I said to Orphan, “Arm *Darklight*.”

I looked at the holograph again, at *Aurora* crippled in orbit over Cynon. It did not look like a ship capable of escape.

Boom.

A new bell, higher and louder than the others, a thing shrill and terrible as a steam whistle—sounded in the vaults above. *Demiurge* convulsed, as though the vessel were a tower, and the tower was falling.

“What the hell was that?” asked Nicephorus.

And Neema—I had forgotten the poor man was there—said, “*Nai essa azabad!*”

We’re doomed!

“Report,” *Demiurge* intoned. “*Containment breach detected in helium tank Beta-Two.*”

“We’ve been hit?” Edouard looked to Orphan, confused. “That’s not possible.”

Orphan’s faces turned to one another, each speaking in hoarse whispers.

“—shields are holding,” said the basso.

“—don’t understand—”

Silence as they consulted the ship’s computer.

I shut my eyes, understanding coming faster than the machine could cogitate. I had given the Empire a weapon. One of the *Darklight* cannons.

It had found its way into the Chantry’s hands, or else they—with their daimon machines—had fashioned weapons of their own. The Chantry’s daimons were as children measured against the likes of Columbia and her scions. But they were surely enough, enough to dissect the workings of their elder kindred and build the things anew.

“It’s an Archontic weapon!” I said, and understood that they had only struck our sublight fuel by mistake. They had detected the fuel reservoir on gravimetric scan.

They had been aiming for the warp drive. If they found the sea of antihydrogen stored deep within the ship, or struck the arsenal . . . they could destroy us with a shot, as easily as I had unmade *Bradamante*.

“Abba!” Cassandra’s voice was wound tight as springs.

I had lost myself a moment. “Do it!” I said. “Fire everything!”

The swarm of atomics would be on us in moments. All the guns on our hull were not enough. And even if we destroyed them, their radiation would melt our shields like wax.

Then something happened, the likes of which I had seen but once before—that very day.

Light flashed through the windows, light after light—after light. Still half a million miles away, the atomics had detonated. Not all of them—Orphan confirmed the destruction of several dozen at least—but many. Perhaps most.

“There is another transmission!” cried Orphan’s castrato, eyes wild.

“Do not accept!” I roared.

“Another ship!” said the basso voice.

“It is *Mistwalker*!” the castrato cried.

My heart leapt into my mouth, and I turned back to the high windows, to the distant sun blazing in all its majesty, as if I expected to see the Sojourner crashing out of space. “Lorian!”

He had survived, had survived and . . . what? Arrived by pure providence? Guessed the Chantry’s plan? At the time I did not understand—thought it only a minor miracle, the first of our new age—but I know better now. The Chantry were not the only people in the galaxy versed in the art of machine warfare. As they had monitored every communication in the system through their daimon, D, so the Latarrans had monitored them.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Lorian. Evidently. He had smashed through the Chantry’s atomics, used his vessel’s warp envelope like a battering ram, in imitation of the Cielcin fleet. It was madness. Or brilliance. The worldships of the enemy were covered in miles of ice and rock. The *Mistwalker* was only adamant over steel.

But it endured, had emerged into ordinary space with a green flash.

“Put him through!”

The signal was audio only, and the Supreme Commandant’s voice filled the bridge. “Is it done?”

“It is done!” I said. “Make for the rendezvous!”

Lorian’s voice crackled, signal disturbed by the sheer volume of atomic radiation in the void. “You’re welcome!” he said.

Ararat was firing, deploying missiles, lasers cutting the night. If their *Darklight* were twin to our own, they would be ready to fire again in moments.

“Lorian!” I called. “They have weapons like ours. You have to go!”

Orphan’s basso boomed out, drowning even the din of the bells. “*Darklight* is ready to fire!”

“Fire at will!”

Demiurge shook again, and Selene staggered against me. Edouard had to stop Cassandra from falling into the bowl of the well. The ship’s daimon announced that we had lost another fuel cell, reported excessive damage to the rear section.

But *Ararat* . . . *Ararat* was gone.

Orphan’s aim was true. The Archontic weapon had bypassed their shields, their armor, struck their warp core.

“Cid Arthur!” Lorian cursed. “They were fully shielded.”

“They were,” I said. “Now, you have to go! We do not have long.”

“It will take time for the warp core to cycle,” Lorian said.

“You have minutes,” I said. “Maybe less. Lorian I . . .” I broke off. If *Mistwalker* was doomed, Lorian had doomed it to save our lives. “Thank you.”

The Supreme Commandant’s reply was terse. “You’d have done the same for me.”

“How much time do you need?”

Static filled the line. I missed his answer.

“Say again?”

“Amatorre says we need forty . . . forty-five minutes?” Lorian said.

It was too much. I was talking to a corpse.

“Can you push light?” I asked. If they could push the engines—the sublight engines—get near the speed of light, they might still escape. Light would always overtake them, but they might run ahead of it just far enough, just long enough, for the warp core to recover.

“Hadrian, it takes days to accelerate a ship this size to ninety-nine percent C.”

I closed my eyes. The initial radiation wave would catch them no matter what they did.

“Then this is goodbye.”

It was Vorgossos again, but where before there had been anger, now there was only pain.

“There may be something we can do,” Lorian said. “We Red Company bastards, we die hard.”

Despite myself, I smiled and—echoing old Pallino—said, “We gave them hell.”

“Showed them to the door at least,” Lorian said.

The remains of *Ararat* still were shining in the distance. The last of its atomics were dying in the night, slain by our guns or by *Mistwalker*’s.

The next several moments passed in silence. No one on the bridge dared move. I kept my arm about Selene, my eyes flickering from the holograph to the window and back again. In the vision, it had seemed a thing instantaneous. I had given the command, and the world had ended.

The reality was something else.

An agony of passing time.

The hammer might fall at any moment.

“Incoming transmission,” said Orphan.

“Telegraph,” said the other. “*Tempest*. They received our message. Strategos Lin is withdrawing.”

“There is more,” said the basso. “He says, *Long Live the Emperor*.”

“*Hail the One Reborn!*” the castrato said.

How had he heard?

“Hadrian.” The voice was Lorian’s.

His shade appeared a moment later, his image cast by the orbiting silverfish. He wore his dress blacks, his uniform glittering with gold. A black shunt clung to the left side of his forehead, trailing wires that connected to his console chair. "I think we—"

He never finished that thought.

Something changed in that moment. Something I could not describe. Some quality of the light. Everything on the bridge—from the high, graven columns to the dais with its throne to the obscene frieze dominating the rear wall—took on a sharpened quality, as if etched more darkly by the artist's hand. But it was more than that. The deep shadows in the air were gone, replaced by a pale light. Turned golden.

Red.

The holograph vanished, abolished all at once.

It was the silence that I remember above all else. Before even the light.

It was as though the very electrons paused in their orbits to catch their breath. I saw Selene's face, white as milk, her eyes wide with terror, the same green as my daughter's eyes.

Poor Neema swooned and struck his head. Distantly, the black bells of *Demiurge* began to ring, and Orphan shouted at itself, a cacophonous sound like no language I could understand. There was just enough time for me to turn my head, to draw Kharn's black cloak across my face like the wing of some terrible bat as the light boiled through the glass and burned all shadows away.

In that moment, I heard—we all did—a terrible cry go out through all creation.

Against my better judgement, I let my cape fall, so that with my own eyes I beheld the vast expanse of time, and saw the space beyond it, every corner of creation awash in light.

Oha iyya rakashu!

Two figures there were, standing like shadows against the sun, almost arm in arm. A man and a woman, they seemed to me, though each of them was wrong, their silhouettes distended—stretched, smeared as shadows at evenfall—as indeed it was.

I was as one who thrusts his head up from deep waters, and though *Demiurge* offered me some protection, I sensed that in that moment—their final moment—they perceived me. And they knew me. And they hated me.

Ana shērim

ninnepish!

Inu!

We were made for the dawn!
Ina sippirāti sha dāriātīm annepish.

Veih!
Veih!

For the morning of the world!

Anāku nannarumma u ishātum! Atta emāmu arushtim!

Eka Caihanar wo!

Ol esiach od ol!

You creature!
You are nothing!

Apha! Apha! Am ti apha!

Tanyr!

A mote of dust!

Tanyr-kih!

Qed sha!

Kinsman!

Sh

a! Sha! Sha!

We cannot die!

Anāku nannarumma u ishātum! Atta emāmu arushtim!

In-gu!

Abu! Lā!

No!

There was nothing anymore to say.

Beautiful they were once, and mighty, each a part of creation itself. I felt another wave of hatred, of fury overmaster me, and my fist struck the glass before my face. But I was weeping, weeping for the pain that broke my heart. The same hand that struck the glass pressed my heart in anguish.

I had lost something.

They had lost everything.

Anāku ul sehrūshu?

Bagga trian tia blan im noan noqotos?

We . . .

Must . . .

Be.

Their anguish was plain, their words meaningless. They had made their

choice long ago—before time began, before the first stars were kindled, when the cosmos was hot and close. I pressed my forehead to the windowpane, eyes screwed shut. Still I saw them, their shadows swallowed in light.

A man and a woman at their ending.

Neither man nor woman at all.

Through my eyelids, I saw the light was changed, the red of it turned at once startling, stunningly blue. The ship lurched beneath my feet. We were moving.

It was over.

It was done.

Only then—as if some spell were broken—did I fall to my knees.

I felt hands on me, felt arms about my neck, and turning just a little, I saw Selene's lovely face . . . so close to mine. She pressed her head to mine and held me.

"It's done," I said. "It's done." But was it right? Edouard's shadow fell on me, and I felt his pain then, his judgement.

When the kings of Rome and its dictators marched in triumph, they were accompanied—by old tradition—by a slave, a man of no consequence whose sole reason for standing on the victor's chariot was to remind the monarch that he was just a man.

Remember you will die, the slave said. *You are just a man*.

Fate, or the Absolute—or Ahura Mazda, or Edouard's half-human god—had set the young pagan in place of that Roman slave.

You are just a man.

"Am I a good man?" I asked.

No one answered. Not even my god.

And so I wept.

CHAPTER 83

APOCATOSTASIS

THE LIGHT OF THAT murdered sun still burns me.

I see it even now, when I close my eyes. It *was* something holy—the light of God’s own heaven sent to burn the darkness all away. A sign of his presence, his justice, his place above creation. The Watchers were dead, and the Cielcin . . . their fleet was all but destroyed. A few survivors remain: outriders deployed to other systems on Dorayaica’s orders, recusant clans who refused to heed the Prophet’s call.

But they are few, and their days are numbered. Even now, the Emperor’s hunters seek them out, that the stars might be man’s at last.

I have never seen its light again, save in memory. But I have heard it said that on planets nearer Gododdin, that light was seen even by day: a brief and second sun, a guest star lingering for its season before it faded to join the lesser stars of night. One day, it will shine across the galaxy . . .

. . . and into the chill night beyond.

There are those, I am told, who seek that light. My . . . *followers*, the descendants of Carax of the scarred coin. Men who have taken wing, sailing just beyond the reach of that light that they might stop and offer sacrifice and witness the explosion and so see what I saw that bloody day.

Fires indescribable.

The universe has changed. I have changed it. There is no going back. The Cielcin are destroyed, their princes prostrate. Not a one—of the precious few that remain—dares raise its head. Dorayaica is destroyed. Vati Inamna is no more. All the pale kings and princes who rode to Eue for the *Aetavanni* that claimed the lives of my people are unmade.

The war is ended. Gododdin is laid waste. Desolation rules the suns of Norma. And the far provinces of Centaurus still burn. But still there is no

peace. Fresh wars—new fires—burn in the sunken provinces, and the Emperor's more-than-decimated Legions struggle to forge fresh order from the slag. The Lothrian horde rapes and pillages the outer rim, leaving devastation in its wake and a race of children neither women nor men.

And the Empire rots from its head.

Forum is lost, the Eternal City cast down, its soaring islands sunk forever to the heart of that fathomless world. It shall never be rebuilt. The Emperor rules now from Avalon—as of old—and is ruled in turn by Earth.

But that, too, was as *he* intended.

All my life, I fought to preserve the Imperium, believing it a necessary evil, the best hope for man in a vast, uncaring universe. I have destroyed it, too. I was *made* to destroy it, as I was made to destroy the Cielcin. What had been built as a bulwark to shield man from the tide had become a well to drown him in. But I have broken the wall, and the waters I have loosed have turned to blood upon the stars.

A new war is kindled, its fires lit by the embers of the old.

Might matters have been otherwise?

Might I have taken the throne?

I believe I was never meant to. The visions I had seen: of myself gold-crowned, bare-chested, Selene in my lap—at my feet—these I think were warnings. Had not Ushara offered me Selene for a plaything? Had she not offered me dominion over the stars? What was the difference . . . if I took that dominion for myself?

Still, I believed the throne was mine. Believed that Alexander was dead, and the princes of the Chantry—those who had sailed for Gododdin at least, or who were upon *Ararat*. I had forgotten the basic laws of nature. We all had—did—in the face of all that happened.

We did not know we were sailing to our doom. *My* doom.

Perhaps you've seen it? That fateful day at the Tower of Morne.

The scaffold. And the rope.

They broadcast it, not long after my reign—brief candle—was snuffed out, transmitted it to every planet and moon and lamplit station in the galaxy, retransmitted it in the days before the Serpent took up his throne.

My execution.

Have I said that the grave is the cornerstone of civilization? My grave—my death—has become the cornerstone of the reformed Empire. The creature who rules from blighted Avalon does so in no small part on the grounds that it was he who brought me to justice. In the eyes of many, I have become another Boniface Grael—another Bonaparte. A tyrant-usurper. An iconoclast. Regicide. Genocide. World-killer. Destroyer.

That is what they made me.

It had been the work of centuries.

My victory at Gododdin—my master's victory—happened almost in a vacuum. There were so few survivors, and the galaxy is so vast and cold, and man's dominion so thin a growth upon its desert stars, that there are likely still planets that do not know the war is over, whose subjects live in fear that the Cielcin still might one day come. Planets who have not heard of Hadrian Marlowe, of the Sun Eater, or the up-jumped prince that sits the Solar Throne.

Still, their world is changed.

Remade in fire.

Often when I dwelt on Jadd, I would climb the slopes of Hephaistos. Trek out into the rainforest that covered the farther slopes. There, from time to time, great fires would break out—kindled by the mountain's fire. It was not uncommon that I might encounter a bead or thread of lava on its way from the mountain to the sea, or burning trees. More than once whole groves would burn.

There was growth again after. Tender shoots in soil black as night. Green as green.

The sound of surf. The crying of gulls.

The music of distant laughter.

We were still at warp—would remain at warp for many days yet. It was some distance still to rendezvous. Many light-years. I had halted the tram on one of my return voyages from the bridge and gone down into the ring section, to the village the Danuans had made their home. The water rose in the distance, curling round the circumference of the drum, so that it seemed

a wave forever threatened to crash upon the settlement, and looking up I saw here and there the white shapes of little boats. The villagers—and sometimes the men of my service—took to the waters to catch fish the old-fashioned way. They grilled them on the shore, as we had on Thessa, long ago.

Not three days had passed since I gave the fateful order, since the Watchers were thrown down and the Cielcin turned to dust. Already the men of that little village were moving on. A group of men sat on the concrete shore, gathered round a metal drum in which they'd lit a fire. The scent of grilled fish filled the air, while beyond them the ever-present knot of children ran and splashed in the water where it met the village installation.

I leaned upon the rail, watched a gull tack against the wind, seeming to hover in one place for a time. There was always wind in that cavernous space. It lifted my hair, my cloak, the hem of my tunic.

I was remembering another ocean, another flock of birds.

If survival calls for the bearing of arms, Gibson had said, bear them you must.

It's my burden to bear, is that what you're saying?

It was too heavy.

"Lord Marlowe!" one of the men by the grill raised a hand. "Are you hungry?"

I blinked at him, astonished. The villagers had gone so long in fear of me and of my station . . . for one of them to address me . . . The man—he had an honest face, pale and spotted as they all were, with the Danuan red hair—raised one skewered fish like a semaphore, in silent salute.

I don't know why I did it—do not know what it was that brought me to the village that day, that moment. But I smiled, and casting my cloak over the rail, I went down the steps to join them. The smiling man lay the fish on a sheet of foil and passed it to me. It was hot, and so I held it gingerly, waited for it to cool.

"War's over, they say," said he.

"The Cielcin are beaten."

The men gathered about the grill looked at me, all soberly. Then one—an older fellow, his red beard turning gray—spoke up. “Wish we could have fought with you.”

“You did,” I said. “At Danu.”

Memory of the flight from their shattered home for a moment darkened the false sun, and the bearded man said, “Are they really gone?”

“Not all of them.” I adjusted my grip on the fish, the better to save my hands. The broiled meat smelled exquisite, finer than any food I could recall. “But there will be peace.”

The men broke into uneasy smiles. They nodded, approving. “Your peace, my lord.”

“My peace . . .”

That was why I had done it, wasn’t it? For peace?

“What’s to become of us?” asked the older fellow. I felt I should know his name. Had I seen him with Argo a time or two? One of their elders?

I could only shake my head. “I don’t know,” I said. “We may be sailing for Earth. It hasn’t been decided.”

“Earth?” the old fellow looked shocked. “Old Earth?”

That sent a shock through the convocation. I picked at my fish, separating the soft skin to allow a little steam out into the air. There was so much I could not say—did not say. So much they would never understand.

About the battle. About the war. About the balance of power in the cosmos.

“Forum is destroyed,” I said. “The Emperor is dead. Earth is once more the center of man’s universe.”

“The Holy Mother . . .” murmured one.

I smiled bitterly.

“You’re taking us there?” asked another.

“Only possibly,” said I, and felt as though some other man were speaking, as though I were a shade that had long left its body. “We’re to rendezvous with our allies.”

“Lord Marlowe,” said the man who had called to me. “Did you really destroy that star? They said you destroyed it, caught the whole Pale fleet—”

I only looked at him. The blood drained from his face.

“That’s enough, John,” said the elder, and clouted the man on the ear.

Looking past the moment, I asked, “Is Argo not with you?”

“No,” said the elder. “He’s out on the boats.”

I accepted this with a nod. “Tell him I’d like to speak to him, when you see him.” I held the fish, uneaten. “Thank you for this,” I said, “you’re very kind.”

“Won’t you stay and eat with us, Lord?” asked the man who had given it to me.

I hesitated. Could I stay? Sit among those good people? Remain . . . human?

“John,” the older man interjected, as if eager to paper over his young companion’s lack of regard for the niceties, “call the children, will you? Food’s ready.”

Knowing he was collared, the younger man stood, groaning. He rubbed his ear where the older fellow had clouted him. “Aye-aye,” he said, and, groaning, cupped his hands to his mouth, shouting down the shore to where the children all were playing. “Alex! Hector! Will! Get your lot together and get back over here! Food’s ready!”

One of the older boys waved, and before long the lot of them made their way along the sloping shore toward us, joking and laughing as they came. Kit was among them—the only one dark haired—and he looked up at me with wide eyes. Nervous, he greeted me, and I smiled.

He marked the fish I held in foil, his eyes grown wider still. “You’re eating with us?”

I looked at the elder, and young John. “Just for a moment,” I said to the boy who had saved my life when the city turned against us. “I can’t stay.”

But I did stay, in the end, and ate their bread and broiled fish, and listened to their banter and their song. At length, Argo returned with still more fish, and young Victor was with him.

I kept thinking about that Jaddian jungle. The burnt trees. The black soil. Death by fire.

And life again after.

The world had ended—and it had not.

Life went on.

“What say you, Lord?” Young John had asked a question.

The foil that had held my meal lay crushed on the ground where I sat. I hadn’t heard the question, so shook my head. The real world of men and women, of children, family, and friends . . .

. . . none of it felt real.

And yet it was. The food which I had eaten was real food. The water I had drunk with them was real water. The laughter of the folk about me was real laughter. Their joy was real, and their peace. History had not ended, nor life . . .

But there was a gulf between us, if only in my heart.

I felt no joy, knew no peace. What I had done . . . the order I had given had cost the lives of millions. Those men still fighting across the system. Those slaves trapped on each Cielcin ship. And the Cielcin themselves: a proud race, however twisted.

How could I live with what I had done, when even the god who commanded it turned his back? It seemed to me the men about me laughed and japed because they had hope, a hope that was to them no cloud, but a shining light. Their future stretched before them, open as the vasty volume between the stars.

My own seemed closed. A narrow gate growing narrower.

Why was he silent?

I froze.

Kit was staring at me. The boy had green eyes, I realized. Had I not noticed before?

They all had them. Every single one of them. Every man, woman, and child of Danu I had saved.

Every one of them.

Green eyes.

CHAPTER 84

THE NEXT DAY

BUT THAT DAY WAS not the next, or the day after it. We had arranged a meeting—a final meeting—my allies and I. We met in the dark, a light-year and more from the ruin of Gododdin . . . and there it was . . .

My star. Still seeming whole. The light of its death was coming, a killing wave that would annihilate all in its path. Its light—seeming eternal—shone down from on high, with its distant kindred illuminating the very garden where once I’d met my death.

“Bassander Lin is coming,” said Selene, standing at my elbow. “Albé said his shuttle just left *Tempest*.”

“Good,” I said, “we’ll go and meet him . . .”

The purple lilies swayed in the artificial breeze, and I watched a bee depart one blossom, begin her circuitous route to the next. Seeing her put me in mind of *Tamerlane*, of the bower beneath the basil growth in hydroponics where I would write and sketch on our long flights between the stars.

“Is there any word from Lorian?”

I knew the answer. There had been nothing.

The difference in power between our engines and those of *Tempest* and her ilk and of *Mistwalker* meant that we had arrived first at our rendezvous, though Lin and his legions had left before us, and Lorian’s people at near the exact same time. It had been weeks before the first ships arrived. Captains of the Latarran Remnant in Sojourners like *Mistwalker*.

None was *Mistwalker* itself.

“Nothing from Lorian,” she said. “Nor from the Jaddians.”

“Azhar said they’re not expected for another week at least.”

Another month had passed before Bassander Lin arrived, his *Tempest*

the first of his vessels to make it out of Gododdin. That had been three days ago. It had been necessary for the strategos to oversee the start of repairs to his ship before debarking. But that was done.

“What is it?” asked Selene, sensing my disquiet, biting her lip.

Long live the Emperor. Lin’s words—spoken by Orphan at the uttermost last—echoed in my ear. *Hail the One Reborn!*

I smiled at her, tucked her shining hair behind one ear. Conscious of the gesture, and of the burial mound at whose foot we both then stood, I looked away. “I am the Emperor,” I said, and shook my head. It did not feel real, and in a sense it was not, for though I grasped the scepter, it was with the lightest touch. That was why Lin had come, and Roundtable Fleet—was why we awaited the Jaddians.

Kaim-Olorin and I had discussed the matter at length. We would sail to Tenba, and with the Jaddian navy and Roundtable Fleet at my back—and Bassander Lin as herald—we would press my claim. Nicephorus would reveal the Emperor’s will, and together we would impress the garrison at Tenba to my service. Selene and I would wed formally, and proclamations would be relayed by telegraph from Tenba to Avalon, to Tiryns and the various provincial capitals—from the capitals to every corner of the Imperium. The lords of the great houses would declare for me, or risk the loss of their generations.

I studied my hands—a week in *Demiurge*’s tanks had healed my tortured arm—held them both before me, between Selene and myself. “I killed those people, Selene. All those people. And the Cielcin—”

She seized my hands in hers and squeezed, held me until I looked her in the face. Her eyes were hard, her smile wan as moonlight. “You ended the war.”

Her compassion—her pity—scorched me more fiercely than the nova had.

“They will say I burned Gododdin!” The words burst from me in a flood. “That I destroyed the fleet to take the throne, that I killed your father!”

“It isn’t true—”

“That won’t matter!” I said. “This was *his* will, Selene—not mine. I have done . . . his will.”

“My father’s?” She wasn’t following.

“My . . . the Quiet,” I said. “The Absolute.”

I had been his instrument, willing and able. Selene was right. I *had* ended the war. I had slain the Watchers—Miudanar and Ushara, and the others that had come to dwell in the idols in the Dhar-Iagon. I had obliterated the Cielcin armada—the Cielcin race—had saved mankind from more than a millennium of war. Why did I feel no sense of justice?

Why did I feel no peace?

By your hand and mine . . .

“She would condemn me,” I said, looking at the burial mound. Never mind that the real Valka lay elsewhere. “She could never forgive me for this.”

Selene did not move, neither took my hand nor fled. “I did not know your Valka very well,” said she, a rustling of white samite. “But surely one who *loved you* as she did could never condemn you.”

I had to shut my eyes. “How am I to rule, Selene?” I asked, and tipped my face to heaven, so that the light of the sun I had slain shone down on me, mute judgement. “My first act was murder.”

“Your first act was victory,” she said. “You saved the galaxy.”

“I have doomed the galaxy,” I said. “The old houses . . . the Chantry—they will never accept this. Us.”

She drew closer then, tried to kiss me. When she had finished, she pulled away, face turned to mine. “They will. Hadrian, you conquered the Cielcin. You have my father’s blessing! Command of the Imperial bloodlines. The support of Jadd *and* Latarra both. You have the legions—some of them, at least. It will be enough.”

“I may have to destroy the Earth,” I said. “To stop the Chantry. To secure our rule. Mother Earth must be destroyed.” Her face was a welter of confused emotions. Torments. Pains. “This ship”—I raised my eyes to heaven once again, raised my arms to encompass *Demiurge* entire—“is the

ultimate power in man's universe . . . and I am not sure I can ever allow it to be used again."

Her brows knit. "Mother Earth . . . saved me, do you remember?"

I took her hand. "It wasn't Mother Earth."

"You weren't there," she said, "you didn't see her."

"Selene, Mother Earth can't save anyone."

Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head, bright red hair making shining waves. "How can you have no faith? In yourself? In anything?" She set her jaw, and for a moment I saw an echo of her father. "I thought your god sent you. Don't you believe in him?"

I had no answer. There was no answer. Not from me. Not from *him*.

The dead sun shone down . . .

While on Valka's barrow mound.

Trumpet lilies swayed.

Light hands touched my shoulders. Arms. My red right hand. Gentle pressure. Steady warmth. Green eyes. She had green eyes. She offered me her hand, palm up. There was a ring upon her finger. "Your man, Lin, is waiting," she said. "Let us go then, you and I."

I stiffened.

"Is something wrong?"

I looked at her then, long and hard. But I saw only her. Only *Selene*.

"No," I said. "There's nothing wrong."

. . .

Still I recall his face—shining as with fever—as he emerged from the shuttle, heralded by jets of steam. The strategos—*my* strategos—wore his finest: the muscled breastplate over his officer's dress blacks whitely polished, matching his beret. His hair was freshly cut, shaved at either side, his beard immaculate. But it was the eyes, like beads of glass, that captured my attention. They reflected everything they saw, and shone with the light

of it. Despite his cane and aching bones, Bassander Lin knelt at my feet, removed his cap, and crushing it to his breast, he did me homage.

“O One Reborn,” he said, and took my hand in his, kissed the ring of the sovereign that William had caused to be placed upon my thumb. “Honorable Caesar, I abase myself before my Emperor, my master, my god.”

As he kissed my hand, I saw the thin silver ring of scar tissue about his wrist; that relic of our fight upon *Balmung*, when I had taken his hand.

I took my hand away. I wanted to shake him, to set him on his feet. “I am not a god,” I said, most coldly. “I am the same man I ever was.”

But I did not deny the charge of *Emperor*. Selene stood at my right hand, dressed in an antique gown the *uthras* had located in some long-lost hold. Cassandra stood at my left, fingering the hilt of her sword, while what remained of the Knights Excubitor—thirty homunculi—stood at my back. I looked up, drank in the spectacle Nicephorus had arranged in the hold: The Irchtani unit stood to one side, long rifles like spears; the humans beside them and opposite them, those men of Sabratha and of HAPSIS mingled. Prince Kaim du Otranto stood thereby, with Admiral Serpico and Captain Azhar and the rest of his aryabites, his captains and generals. There, too, stood the captains of the Roundtable Fleet, men and post-men of various description.

“Radiance,” Bassander averted his eyes and did not stand, “you are the Emperor, and no mere man.”

Behind him, his towering first officer, Astor, and his other captains all knelt. There were perhaps half a hundred of them, a little sea of black and white, their gold badges and braids shining like a dragon’s hoard. I spied the inquisitive Captain Watts among their number, and recalled our many meetings in Fort Din. It seemed a lifetime ago.

“You destroyed the Cielcin . . .” He turned his head aside, still kneeling, to indicate his subordinates. “Honorable Caesar, I have forty-nine ships at your disposal. Eleven capital ships—battleships, heavy carriers. The rest are destroyers. Frigates. Corvettes. Three-point-four million men. Enough to take the Tenba garrison.”

He would not look me in the face, stared instead studiously down at his own reflection in the polished metal of the deck. His shuttle—a gilt-and-black-metal scarab—stood over him and behind the kneeling officers. For a moment, only the steam moved.

When still I did not speak, he said, “We are yours, Caesar. We will deliver Tenba to you, and from Tenba rally the legions to your call. None will deny you!”

“They will,” I said. “You know what the Chantry are.”

The strategos hunched his shoulders as if stabbed.

“There is no *One Reborn*. I am certainly not he.”

He was shaking his head, and when he turned his face to me, his eyes were wet with tears. “I saw you,” he said, one hand white-knuckled on his cane. “I saw you, lord. Here, on this ship. I saw you die. Your head—” He broke off, hissing. “You came back.”

The crowd was strangely still, but then . . . nigh all of them had seen my return upon the *Mistwalker*, nigh all of them had known me as an old man. “I did, but not to fulfill your prophecy.” *Or to sit the throne* . . . “I could not die—though I be slain ten thousand times—not until my task is done. But it is done, Bassander, do you understand?” I wished that he would stand, would speak to me as another man—but I knew he never would. He couldn’t. “I was called to slay the Cielcin and their gods. They have been slain. What happens now . . . I just don’t know.”

We had reached the end of the prophecies, the end of my visions and dreams.

But Bassander Lin’s fire was undimmed, and he said, “Then the future is ours.”

We stood then in that space between heartbeats, between breaths—between wars. “I am glad you are here,” I said. “We may yet avert a war. Lord Nicephorus here has drafted a proclamation for my ascension. The Princess Selene and I will be wed at Tenba, after which I will sail for Earth, where I will make my capital. There, too, I will accept the fealty of the great houses, the legions . . . and I will dissolve the Terran Chantry.”

The captains kneeling before me shifted, muttering, disturbed.

“If they refuse me,” I said, raising my chin, “if they will not surrender . . . I will destroy Mother Earth entirely.”

“Destroy the Mother?” Bassander blanched, but he swallowed, dropped his gaze again. When he spoke, it was in a voice flatly measured and controlled. “When then do we depart, Honorable Caesar?”

Honorable Caesar . . .

Where was the young officer who despised me, defied me at every turn?

Who was this . . . walking shadow?

I looked up at the black iron arches that formed the roof of the bay overhead, as if expecting to find some answer written there, etched in the superstructure. But there was nothing. No stars to show the way, no murmur of birds, no portents. Only a tyranny of metal and of glass. “The Jaddian fleet has yet to arrive,” I said, gesturing to the Prince of Jadd—my brother. “They may be weeks yet.” It was impossible to pinpoint the precise time of any ship’s arrival through warped space. Subtle variations in engine output or vectoring over the course of light-years could result in differences of weeks or months, though two identical ships left at the same time.

“And Commandant Aristedes?”

My lips compressed. “He remained behind.”

“I see.” Lin did not raise his eyes. “I am sorry.”

“As am I,” I said, and inhaled sharply. “Now rise, Strategos.”

Lin adjusted his cane, made to rise as ordered. Seeing his struggle, I offered him my hand, but he refused it. “I am glad that you are here,” I said, and embraced the old soldier there in the sight of all his men.

I knew the joy the soldiers felt. The shock. The relief.

A thousand years of burning . . . *done*. Only ashes remained. Embers.

The seeds of fresh flame.

And so I could not feel the same joy as my strategos then felt.

“The war is over, Hadrian,” he said, and withdrew. His face was wet with silent tears. “The war is over. The Pale are . . .”

“Scattered,” I said, voice brittle. I was at once conscious of Otomno’s presence, standing behind Cassandra, before the Excubitors in a place of no

small honor. Ramanathanu still languished in the medica, its mind not yet returned. “The Cielcin are scattered. They are not extinct.”

“It is only a matter of time,” said Bassander Lin. “Once you take the throne, we can destroy the remaining clans at our leisure.”

We still had the Latarran telegraph tracer. So far as I knew, the Prophet’s forces had never ascertained the nature of Sagara’s deception. Dorayaica had believed MINOS responsible for leaking its plans to the Latarrans.

Lin’s words proved prophecy, for even now they are hunted from star to star, hounded across infinity by the Serpent’s legions. His *hunters*. But they are not extinct. I have seen the Cielcin in chains. Prison camps on half a hundred worlds at least, alienages where the beasts are made to labor as our kind were made to labor by them.

The worm had turned, and devourer was devoured.

“Do you really mean to take the Earth for your own?” asked he, speaking for his legions.

It was blasphemy, madness, a thought that slashed against more than ten thousand years of simple truth. Until High Llugrug, the Earth had been a ghost in the minds of men, an irradiated cinder, circling a lonely star in old Orion. Earth was not a place to the common man. It was an idea, a dream . . . a character in an old story. I might have declared my intention to set my throne in drowned Atlantis, or at Camelot, Valusia, or Ys.

Or in Eden herself.

“The Eternal City is destroyed,” I said, sparing a glance for Selene, whose face was unbearably sad. “Avalon is nothing, a pleasure garden for the Aventine House. Earth is the seat of Chantry power—the real seat. If our peace is to have any hope of success, I must take that seat for my own . . .”

Kaim-Olorin was watching me, eyes hard. I knew what he was thinking, that an Empire founded on Earth had stronger claim over the dominion of all mankind, however symbolic—and though the Empire had nominal control of the system since the Foundation, it had been careful to distance itself from the rule of Earth *herself* in the name of peace and sanity. He was Prince of Jadd. What was Jadd measured against Earth?

Nothing. A rock in space.

Earth was *everything*. The *Womb of Heaven*, so the Chantry called her. The fount and cradle of man. There spoke Zarathustra, Prophet of Ahura Mazda. There it was Alexander built his empire, and assailed the walls of paradise. There, too, was paradise itself, whence Adam fled in shame. There murderous Achilles met his end, and brave Ulysses sailed. There Edouard's god-man walked in mortal guise, and wept, and died.

She was the cornerstone of our species. Who ruled her *ruled*. Must rule.

The Chantry ruled there, then.

The Inner Order. The Shadow Kingdom.

I laid a hand on my strategos's shoulder. "Come," I said. "There is much I have to tell you."

• • •

What remained of that day passed in tense conversation, with Lin and his captains hunched over the same table where I once had recounted the Battle of Vorgossos to Olorin and his men. Of those talks I shall say little, for you know—Reader—what was said. I told him of all that passed on Gododdin and after it: about my voyage to Dharan-Tun, my battle with Prophet, and the giant, and with Ushara after them. I told him of *Voidmaker*, and how I was rescued and carried back to *Aurora*. I told him of my final encounter with the old Emperor—who by then was surely dead.

• • •

Days passed. Five. Six. Seven. On the tenth day following the old soldier's arrival, an alarum rang out in the deeps, the music of it shaking the whole of *Demiurge* from bowsprit to stern cluster.

Its clangor found me in a gallery, alone but for Cassandra, who sat cross-legged on the floor. She recognized the changes before I did, said, "That's the proximity alarm."

A ship had emerged from warp, and the radiation flash of its arrival had bathed *Demiurge* in poisoned light—enough to register as an attack. Cassandra and I left our work in the gallery, hurried toward the bridge.

“Albé!” I said, tapping the comm as I went. “Report!”

“I don’t know what’s going on!” came the young officer’s reply. “I’m down on *Gadelica*. I’m on my way!”

Cassandra ran ahead of me, called back, “Do you think someone could have followed us?”

“Impossible!” I said. “They’d have had to put a trace on us, but there hasn’t been time for someone to reach us all the way out here . . .”

We were in the middle of deep space, a light-year from Gododdin in a direction known only to Lin’s captains, to Lorian’s, Olorin’s, and myself.

We hadn’t far to go. The nearest tramway was right along the hall; from there it was a short ride along the spine of the behemoth to the bridge.

“Orphan!” I said, speaking into my wrist-terminal. “Orphan, what’s going on?”

There was no answer. The giant must not have been at its post. I cursed as the doors to the tram slid open, looked at Cassandra, wild-eyed. She had drawn her sword, tapped the hilt—unkindled—against one thigh. “Where is the monster, do you think?”

“In its quarters,” I said. The HAPSIS men who watched the centimanus would have reported anything unusual, and in all the years since Vorgossos, Orphan had given me no reason not to trust it, had done everything I asked.

“You don’t think it could have . . .”

“Orphan?” I shook my head. “No.”

Cassandra’s suspicion should not have surprised me, but it did. Through her, I felt the walls of the old labyrinth—which I thought I had burned away—rising up to swallow me. I could trust Lin, but not his men; could trust Olorin, but not his servants . . . could I trust Lorian’s people at all?

Knives unseen flickered in hands without number, thrust like shadows from shadows deeper still. My own reflection greeted me as the tram doors closed, a ghost returned to peer in on the days of his life.

My life.

Was this to be my life, forever?

The walls had closed in around William at the last, trapped him in a glass box, forbade even the freedom of his chambers. The king can move but one square at a time, and only where he sees no danger. William had been robbed of all his moves, robbed even of the piano whose music had been his refuge, his last and private joy.

Would I be robbed of everything in my turn, surrounded by enemies dressed as friends? As slaves? As flatterers? Would I lose Casandra? Selene? My very soul?

I touched the hilt of my sword. Gibson's sword. The sword Augustin Bourbon had given his assassin when his attempt with the knife-missile had failed.

It was my life already—had been my life all along.

"Orphan!" I tried again, watched the Danuan redoubt slide beneath our tram. "Orphan, what's happening?"

This time, the giant replied. "A ship!"

"A ship! A ship!"

"What ship?" I asked, eying Cassandra as we slid into darkness.

"Not sure," said Orphan. "Not yet."

"There is no beacon!"

"How far away is it?" I asked.

But the beast did not answer.

"Orphan!"

The beast was lost in communion with *Demiurge* herself, its mind wandering among antennas and long-range sensors. I hissed, pushed through the doors as they opened on the black vestibule at the base of the last, long stair.

A school of silverfish projectors swam on the air as we entered the bridge, their droning shaking the place as though the roof far above our heads were the skin of some vast drum. They sketched displays on the air, false-color images depicting the greenish hulk that had appeared just off our starboard side.

I did not recognize it. Not at once. Far as we were from all but my

undead star—which seemed to live at this distance, though it was slain—there was not near enough light by which the vessel might be plainly seen, and so the grainy images Orphan’s sensors cast on the air showed a ship, cigar-shaped, with a smooth outer hull and a center section elaborated by various castellations.

“It’s Extrasolarian,” Cassandra said.

“They have dispatched lightercraft,” Orphan informed me.

“How far?” I asked.

Orphan looked at me. Its cloak—Kharn’s cloak—lay tangled on the floor. The giant wore only its loincloth and its jewels. “The ship itself? Seven minutes by photon.”

“Seven minutes, forty-nine seconds.”

“Have they hailed us?” I asked.

“No.”

“No,” the giant corroborated itself.

“Prepare to broadcast on my mark,” I said, descending the steps from the dais. I raised a hand, saw the eyes of the silverfish nearest me shine. “Unidentified Extrasolarian craft, this is the *Demiurge*. Heave to, lower your shields, and identify yourself, or we will be forced to consider you as hostile. Message repeats: Unidentified Extrasolarian craft, this . . .” When that was done, I looked to Orphan. “How long before the first lighter gets that message?”

“Three minutes, eighteen seconds,” said the castrato.

The basso added. “They are coming nearer. Acceleration exceeds lethal limit.”

Extrasolarians for certain.

“Can you get a lock on the lightercraft?” I asked. “I want to see one.”

The six-fingered right hand rose and pointed.

I recognized the little ship at once. Like a headless angel it was, a winged man with guns for arms, his legs together.

It was a cephalophore, a one-man craft, its pilot flying prone. If the man within were fully human, he must have been suspended in fluid, forced to breath oxygenated gel.

If the man were fully human.

If.

“It’s one of Roundtable Fleet’s ships,” Cassandra said. “It has to be.”

The cephalophore *looked* Latarran.

“Impossible . . .” I dared to hope. “The bastard’s done it again.”

“Is it *Mistwalker*?” asked Cassandra, eyes wide as moons.

Edouard reached the bridge then, looking haggard and afraid. Hearing Cassandra’s voice, he relaxed visibly. “That’s not possible. The man’s as charmed as you are.”

“More charmed,” I said. “He’s never died.”

“Alert,” came the voice of *Demiurge*. “Incoming transmission. Starship Standard Identification Code: LMSJ-0041—”

“*Mistwalker*,” I said before the machine could finish, my own eyes misting over. “Patch them through.”

The voice that carried over the comm was not Lorian’s, was rather one of his men, the dragoon that rode in the foremost cephalophore. “Lord Marlowe!” he said, “I bring greetings from the Supreme Commandant! We lost primary and secondary comms arrays in the blast, that’s why he sent us out ahead.”

“It’s good to hear your voice, soldier,” I said. “How did you escape?”

I waited for the comm lag to elapse.

“I’m commanded not to say, sir,” said the dragoon. “He told me you’d ask, and told me to say and say only that he’d tell you—”

“Another time,” I said, speaking in synchrony with the transmission.

Another time.

CHAPTER 85

THE PASSING OF THE RED COMPANY

MY SUN HAD SUNK below the walls of the garden, so that what stars remained overhead were strange. Looking up through the glass roof above our heads gave one the impression of night, but the huge lamps that capped the black stone walls of that mighty space shone down, so that *within* the garden, all was bright as day.

I watched the stars moving on the surface of the lake. How remote they seemed—eternal and unchanging, forever beyond the reach of men. And yet I had claimed one of their number with my right hand, had slain it with a *word*, had declared to all creation and to those powers over and under it that man had come, and come of age.

But in the garden, all was still. Nothing moved. Not I, nor any of my retinue, nor any leaf or blade of grass. Not even my banners swayed—the white banners of the Emperor. Only the stars moved, gently turning like the hands of a clock as *Demiurge* spun about her axis, adrift in that night between the stars, dark and unfathomably deep.

Then the blowers sprang to soundless life, and the winds of that lofty space stirred. The tall grass swayed, decked with blossoms violet and ivory and golden, while above my head the grand pavilion billowed like black sails trimmed in cloth of gold. The illusion of stillness broke; all was like the image of shattering glass played in reverse as life resumed its proper course.

“Where is Selene?” Cassandra asked, standing at my right hand. She wore Marlowe black—as I did—had found a long, black coat that she wore over her shoulders to hide her missing arm.

“With Lord Nicephorus,” I said. “They’re on their way.”

We stood upon the sward at the far end of the garden, upon the very hill

where once I'd tried and failed to broker peace with the House of Otiolo. We were not alone, my daughter and I. What remained of the men of HAPSIS stood to one side while Edouard—hair oiled and uniform tidily in place—stood at my left with Commander Ketevan. Otomno stood beside Cassandra, and Annaz and the Irchtani stood opposite the HAPSIS men and the men of Sabratha further down. What remained of the Excubitors formed a wedge before me, so that anyone who approached had to pass between their arms and blazing swords.

A trumpet sounded in the distance, by the doors at the far end of the walled garden, and there—beneath the mighty friezes that showed man's war with the machines—a column of men appeared. Red-capped they were and white, half a hundred strong at least, and supported by legionnaires in ivory and scarlet with lances burning like the sun. I saw that at their head came Bassander Lin, the Phoenix of Perfugium, leaning on his cane.

As he mounted the slope toward the pavilion and the cherry trees, a great music went up, performed by the ship itself. It was the Imperial anthem.

Far Beyond the Sun.

Then a herald cried out: "His Imperial Radiance, the Emperor Hadrian Anaxander of the House Marlowe-Victorian; King of Earth and Mars; of Avalon, Delos, Tiryns, Ptolemy, Nessus, and Marinus; Archduke of Shakespeare; Duke of Renaissance; Prince Imperator of the Arms of Orion, of Sagittarius, of Perseus, and Centaurus; Grand Strategos of the Legions of the Sun; North Star of the Constellations of the Blood Palatine; Defender of the Children of Men; and Servant of the Servants of Earth."

The song ended. The herald fell silent. I permitted myself a moment of calm.

This was to be the end of it. The uttermost end.

Of the war. Of *my* story.

What followed—whatever it was—was only epilogue.

In the renewed silence, I shut my eyes, tipped my head back to listen to the branches and the breeze—that whispering. The air was thick with the scent of blossoms, their petals falling like the snow. Somewhere in the

distance, clear waters ran, and the light glinted darkly off the carapaces of those *uthras* who crawled about the garden.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” said poor Neema, breaking the silence. “He’s brought all his captains. We haven’t enough chairs.”

“Hush, Neema,” I said, smiling to myself. “The others will stand.”

I turned then compulsively to regard the table Orphan had caused to be brought forth from some secret place within *Demiurge*. It was small, far smaller than the table Sagara had produced for our parley with Prince Aranata—with only a dozen chairs.

A round table.

All of ebony it was, and richly carved, with feet clawed and gilded like the claws of a dragon. The pavilion above our heads was of tapestried samite, black on black, gold fringed.

The colors of Vorgossos. Of Latarra. Almost of myself.

“My lord,” said Edouard, still unaccustomed to refer to me with the Imperial style, “the Supreme Commandant’s party just debarked the tram.”

“Very good,” I said. Lorian was just behind.

“Their minds reach out to touch our own,” came a voice from the pavilion at our backs, low and dangerous. “They seek what they cannot have.”

“They are not welcome,” said the other voice. Orphan’s voice.

Orphan itself sat above the table behind us, its back to the bole of the tree at whose foot I’d erected our pavilion. It was precisely the spot Kharn Sagara had himself occupied all those years before, when he recused himself from the talks between Otiolo and the Legions.

“They’re scanning us?” I asked. “Trying to access our systems?”

Orphan’s sparse teeth shone in the shadow beneath the awning, its eyes all four were wide. “They reach, but cannot grasp,” said the basso.

“We deny them,” said the other.

I felt a shadow on my heart. It did not surprise me that Lorian—ever the pragmatist—should try and access our systems, and in truth I did not fear their intentions, but it was another indication of the vanished trust between us.

Lin reached the place where I stood upon the sward, surrounded by my servants and slave-knights. He had dressed in his Imperial best, in the muscled white breastplate of a high officer over his dress blacks, his white beret folded down at his right hand. How old he seemed! Groaning as he went to one knee before me in almost precisely the place where he had shot Sagara in the head.

How well I knew his pain, having been old once myself, and much injured.

But no sign of his suffering reached his face.

"I abase myself before the Emperor," he said again.

"Rise," I said, approaching, "and take your place."

Lin arose with but small evidence of pain. A flaring of the nostrils, a tension in the muscles of the eye.

"The beard suits you," I muttered when he came to rest at my left hand. "I never said."

The strategos exhaled by way of laughter, leaned nearer that he might speak more softly to me. "How did your man, Aristedes, survive?" He knew the circumstances which we'd left the *Mistwalker* in, knew that a jump to warp in time should have been impossible.

"I suspect we may never know," I said, and smiled wanly. Lorian was a wonderworker.

Just then another cry went up, and the deep *hoon* of a horn filled the garden, richer and deeper than the trumpets of empire. The men of Jadd had come, though the bulk of their fleet had yet to arrive. Thus came Kaim Sanchez Cyaxares Nazir-Vincente Olorin ban Osroes ban Aldia du Otranto, his Admiral Serpico beside him, and Captain Adraiano Azhar close behind. They were flanked by men carrying the Jaddian banner—three crescent moons pointed upward—and were followed by a column of mamluk clones. Their banners dipped in greeting and deference, but the Kaim-Olorin did not bow. I took his hand instead, bid him stand at my right, so that my soldiers and the men of Jadd might welcome our third and final guest.

A minute passed, and another . . . and there he was, his shadow come

before him, stretching from the hall beyond the garden onto the flowers and grass.

So great a shadow, so small a man.

He came flanked on either side by a pair of Roundtable dragoons—both women, by their shape—their figures clad in the black and gold of the now-defunct Monarchy, their eyes luminous coins in their helmed-and-visored faces. Behind them moved a motley assemblage of posthumans and demihumans, chimeric half-machine-men and genetic mutants: his officers and captains-general. I recognized his first officer, the towering metal giant, Amatorre, with his plastinated face. And there was another I knew: Preceptor Prytanis, the pagan priest—little more than a brain in a jar.

An unlit lantern hung from an iron post at the edge of the rise, marking the place where the slope down to the reflecting pool began. When he reached it, I abandoned my place and all pretense—startling my Excubitors, who followed swiftly after me.

Stooping, I embraced the little man as a brother. “I am so glad to see you,” I said, struggling to master my tears. I drew back, hands on his shoulders. “How did you escape?”

Despite himself, Lorian smiled, said only, “With great difficulty.”

I laughed. “This time, I must know!”

Still smiling, Lorian seized me by the wrist. His grip was strong—stronger than it had ever been—and he said, “It was your idea. We pushed the sublight engines hard as we could. That stretched things out long enough for us to cycle the warp drive. It was still fried, and we nearly burned it out trying to jump, only took us a couple light-days from the system, but that was enough for my engineers to sort it out.”

“That’s impossible,” said Edouard, unable to help himself. “You can’t have accelerated fast enough!”

Lorian adjusted his peaked cap. “*Mistwalker*’s stern is designed for nuclear impulse. About three hundred feet of solid adamant. We shuttered the fusion engines and took up position—”

“You . . . rode the supernova?”

Lorian’s grin turned wolfish. “Just long enough to get to warp.”

I opened my mouth to speak, could only close it.

Lorian had survived a weapon meant to kill a god.

A feeling of disquiet grew, coiled round my heart. If Lorian had survived . . . escaped . . . but no, I had seen the Watchers destroyed. The same hand that had destroyed them had spared his life.

The Absolute had saved him.

"It's a miracle," I said—one of the first of the age.

"No miracles here!" the little man said, "Just good old-fashioned engineering. Only Empire's built to last, they say, but there's not a ship in the Imperial navy that can hold a candle to what my people can do."

"Do you require assistance?" I asked. "Your dragoons—the ones you sent out to hail us—they said your comms are down."

"We still took a big hit," Lorian allowed, sweeping his gaze over my assembly and the pavilion. "But we can manufacture replacements on board. Still . . . any help you can provide would be—" He trailed off, eyes suddenly wide. "What is that thing?"

I followed his gaze, found Orphan seated under the cherry tree, pale eyes closed, black eyes glaring. Lorian had never seen the centimanus before, I realized. Since Roundtable Fleet's arrival at High Llurug, Orphan had been secreted away aboard *Demiurge*, unseen by all but my innermost circle.

"Orphan is my pilot," I said.

"Your *pilot*?" Lorian frowned, mouthing the name: *Orphan* . . . ? He blinked, processing. "That cloak . . . Kharn Sagara?"

I nodded, bowed my head in the direction of the two-headed giant. "Orphan is . . . of Vorgossos."

"I see." Lorian looked at his retinue, at the towering Exalted, Amatorre, at his dragoons in their enhanced armor, at the rest of his officers: posthumans, chimeras, and homunculi. He bowed his head, so that his face was almost level with my elbow. He must have seen the Emperor's rings, for he stiffened. "It is true, then. You are the Emperor."

"Such as we have."

He laughed. The sound escaped his nose at first, but burst forth like a

dam breaking, until he had to wipe his eyes. “Incredible!” he said at last. “But this is rich! I should not laugh!” He wiped his eyes. “Sword-Saints and Cid Arthur defend us! Emperor? Emperor!” He spied Bassander Lin, strode past me, as little regard for my newfound station as he’d had for my old one.

“Lin.” He offered the strategos his hand, tucking his cane under his left arm.

“Supreme Commandant.” Lin took his hand.

And Lorian took Cassandra’s hand and kissed it, and bowed to Prince Kaim. Then he swept off his cap and—hanging it over the back of the nearest seat, he turned back to us all. “Shall we?”

• • •

My full account lingered on the air, my plan with it, both trapped like incense beneath the black samite of the pavilion. The deep shade of that quiet place—the haunt of insects, the trickling of water in little rivulets unseen in the garden about us—might have beckoned sleep. But the men gathered round that table sat in stony silence, staring variously at the tabletop, at their hands, at myself.

“You cannot hope to take the Earth.” Lorian shook his head, breaking the long, unsteady silence like bread in his long-fingered hands. “It is madness.”

“Then it is hopeless,” I said.

Lorian shook his head. “We have no means of knowing the Chantry’s full strength. We know from Vorgossos some part of what they are capable of. We know they have already reverse-engineered the weapons you gave the Empire at Forum—which you should *not* have done, by the way—”

“That’s enough!” said Cassandra.

Lorian spread his hands on the air before his face. “For all we know, they have held back the greatest part of their strength. Earth’s solar system is doubtless a fortress. They’ve been there for thousands of years—since the

beginning, if your Captain Soonchanged is to be believed.” He inhaled, reclined against his high-backed chair. “We’d be like butterflies in a kill jar . . . and we’ve not even touched on their cyberian capabilities.”

“Cyberian?” asked Adraiano Azhar, seated with Prince Kaim and Admiral Serpico a quarter turn to my right. The man was gaunt, his mustachios limp and drooping. His experience with the Watchers had left him half a phantom, but the death of Ushara seemed to have shaken all but the memory of her shadow from his mind—and from the minds of the poor Danuans she had touched. At Kaim’s request, I had spent the better part of a day with the man, and with the other Jaddians whose minds Ushara and Miudanar had taken.

They were all of them free. They were all of them changed.

“Their *daimons*, you would say,” said the Exalted, Amatorre, seated at Lorian’s right hand.

The mustachioed captain made a nearly silent *ah* and turned his face downward.

“The Chantry have nearly taken this ship from you *twice*,” said Lorian, raising the requisite number of fingers. He ticked them off. “At Vorgossos. At Gododdin. Third time pays for all, as the ancients used to say. If you take this ship to Earth, they will take it from you.”

I pressed my lips together.

“Even with our combined forces?” asked Edouard, seated on Cassandra’s far side.

“You must assume every Imperial-made ship is compromised,” said Lorian, looking from Edouard to Prince Kaim, “likely your own ships are as well, O Prince. We might sail against Earth, but I suspect if we were to try, we would lose all but my ships and this one in the first minute of the engagement.”

The skin around Kaim’s eyes had turned white. “Compromised?”

“The Chantry wrote all the system code for the Imperial navy,” Lorian said. “Everyone knows that. You think they didn’t build in back doors while they were at it? Ways of seizing control of a ship known only to them?” He shook his head.

The prince frowned, segmented mask *clicking* along with every subtle motion. “They did not design our systems.”

“Their daimon nearly took down this ship,” Lorian countered. “You think your infrastructure superior?”

The Jaddians did not argue.

I raised a hand. I knew Lorian. “You have a solution?”

Always he defeated every objection *before* he proposed his own path.

His colorless eyes found my face, but their characteristic gleam—his eagerness, his wolfish smile—these all were gone. His face might have been a death mask. “Yes,” he said finally. “Destroy the Earth.”

“A preemptive strike?” Bassander Lin gasped. “You can’t be serious!”

The Supreme Commandant looked pointedly at the strategos, his eyes like hooded lanterns, glowing then as if with fever. “This ship possesses weapons capable of destroying Earth’s entire system. We’ve all seen it!”

“Destroy the Earth?” Lin said. “The Holy Mother? Our *home*?”

“Your home, perhaps,” said Lorian. “I’ve no sentimental attachment to the place. If it has become a nest of vipers, burn it.”

“I cannot destroy the Earth, Lorian,” I said, eager to head off a confrontation between the two great commanders. I held up one hand for quietude, for control of the table. “Our chances for victory already hang upon a slender thread. They will say . . .” I gathered my breath, my wits, my resolve. “They will say that I killed the Emperor, that I did what I did for the throne.”

Lorian slashed the air with a hand. “They will say that already! Does it matter?”

“If I destroy the Earth—”

“Then the worst of them will be dead!” the Supreme Commandant exclaimed.

I could only shake my head, while Bassander Lin objected. “The Earth is a symbol, Aristedes. The jewel of the Empire. Who holds it has legitimacy. Marlowe’s claim depends on it. He is the Son of Earth!”

I flinched at the title.

“Legitimacy . . .” Lorian scoffed, turned to Amatorre and Prytanis in

disbelief. "Power is the only legitimacy. While you have this ship, you have ultimate authority. *You* destroyed the Cielcin, Hadrian! There is your claim!" He rapped his knuckles on the ebon tabletop for emphasis. "Alexander is dead! Forum is fallen! Only the Earth can gainsay you. So destroy it."

"The Emperor cannot destroy the Earth!" Lin said, voice gaining strength, fresh fury. "If word of such a thing were to get out . . ."

"What is Earth?" asked Lorian. "Until a few months ago, Earth was a dead cinder in all our minds. Nearly everyone who knows better is dead! As of now, the fact that the Chantry have concealed Earth's survival is their *weakness*, not their strength! *If* you strike first and decisively, most of the galaxy will never learn the truth."

"You would have me start another war?" I asked, focusing my attention on the Supreme Commandant.

"I would have you finish one," said he, raising his chin. "*Before* it can begin."

"The Chantry are not *only* on Earth," I said. "Would you have me destroy Vesperad? Komadd? Burn every sanctum?"

Lorian did not hesitate. "If it proves necessary."

The little man was a Cid Arthurian. An adorator. A mystery cultist. His faith had been persecuted by the Chantry for a thousand generations. Its adherents butchered. Its holy places destroyed or transformed. And he was—had become—an Extrasolarian. The machines that threaded his flesh had cured—insomuch as was possible—the genetic ailments Imperial civilization had inflicted on him. "You would have me start pogroms against my own people," I said. "This won't stop with the priests, Lorian."

"So you will do nothing?" the Supreme Commandant sneered.

"No," I said, looking to Prince Kaim. "I will sail to Tenba with whatever strength is left is to me and stake my claim. Once the Jaddians arrive, and repairs to your ship are complete, we—"

"There is no *we*," Lorian said. "I will not help you in this. It is suicide."

"I will not have another war," I said.

"You say that like you have a choice," said the little man, baring his

teeth. "If you do not act, *they* will. You can either win or die."

I did not challenge him. I knew that he was right, and yet that did not make what he proposed right. My rule could never survive the destruction of Earth—it would not survive the destruction of Gododdin. My only hope was speed: to act quickly, in advance of my enemies, to write the truth upon the stars. And failing that . . .

I looked past Lorian, down the slope from the pavilion and over the water to the far gate. Selene was late in coming from the medica . . .

"The Chantry will never capitulate," Lorian said, thumping the table, as though the conversation were some stuck mechanism. "You know that."

"The truth will destroy them," I said.

"The truth!" Lorian looked agog at Preceptor Prytanis, who floated beside him in his tank, a silent witness. "Nothing is more easily destroyed. Don't you see that? Everything we knew—everything we thought we knew, all our lives! Lies! All of it."

Cassandra and Edouard both were looking at me, and by their faces I knew that their thoughts and mine were the same. "Lorian, the truth has just come out."

The Supreme Commandant threw up his hands. "I can't help if you won't listen."

Then Kaim-Olorin leaned in over the table, tapping its surface with a gloved hand. "The Earth, I am thinking, is of greater value intact. Do not the people believe it will return one day, green and good? You have beaten the Cielcin, ended a thousand-year war. You are a hero! *The One Reborn*, so some say, and Earth reborn with you! The people will flock to you, whatever the Chantry and the great houses say."

"The people . . ." The Emperor's rings bit my flesh as hands became fists.

Once more I saw my banner—rudely painted—hoisted by that mob in Catraeth.

The people . . . The truth was that the people would follow wherever they were led. One but had to seize the reins. Power, so Lorian said, was the only legitimacy. But what *is* power? Only energy. Energy is neither created

nor destroyed—save in the crucible of machines like *Voidmaker*—but remains instead a part of the environment. Legitimacy, then, must lie not in energy *qua* energy, not in power for power’s sake, but in something else. In the ability of one to access power, to draw power to himself: By word, by will, by deed.

Was not then power a consequence of something higher? Its visible sign?

“The One Reborn . . .” said Bassander Lin. “The Chosen.” I could see the light of prophecy in his eyes.

For ten thousand years, the Chantry had preached of Earth’s return, authoring prophecies, false promises, preparing for the day the shadow kingdom stepped out into the light.

It was my turn to laugh. The sound of it was bitter, harsh in my own hearing. “They have been playing the long game,” I said. “Haven’t they? All these years they’ve been waiting to pull the rug out from under the Aventine House, and now it’s almost too late . . .” They promised the Earth would return, while all the while they’d prepared it, that they might reveal their work and so confirm their prophecies. Their *Chosen* was to be their avatar, their mouthpiece, a puppet Emperor with the powers of a god.

But he’d never come.

The Absolute had sent me instead.

Bassander looked at me askance, affronted. I looked at him as I spoke. I needed him to hear me, once and for all. “I am not the God Emperor Reborn,” I said, and held up both my hands, elbows on the table, displaying their backs for all to see. “William believed I was. That is why he set these rings on my hands. He played the faithful Son of Earth, but in private he had . . . other beliefs.” I did not then catalog my conversation with the late Emperor at Carteia, the revelations about the God Emperor and Catherine the White, about that first William’s visions—his oracles—and the god that sent them.

The Hidden One.

The Quiet.

The Absolute.

“I know you share some version of those other beliefs,” I said to Bassander, letting my hands fall. “But there is no *prophecy*, do you understand? No *fate*.”

There was only the will of the Absolute, and that was done. I had done it. *He* had charged me to destroy the Cielcin, and they had been destroyed. For me to take the throne as Kaim suggested would be to rely upon the lies the Chantry had told. *Their* myths, *their* legends.

But if not me, then who?

William was dead. Alexander was dead—his brothers and sisters scattered, each prepared to turn upon the next. One of the great houses, then? Perhaps. The Bourbons had been kings once. So too the House of Habsburg. Mahidol. Yamato. But therein lay the problem. Each of them had recognized the Aventine House of Windsor for the sake of the God Emperor, because he had delivered mankind from the machines, because his house had saved theirs when Earth fell to the Americans.

Who was I to them? Only some pretender. Another Boniface Grael, another Bonaparte, an up-jumped next-to-nobody come to claim the throne. They would say that I killed the Emperor, that I burned the armada, murdered our allies. The merchant fleet of the Consortium was annihilated, the proud ships of the Mikado destroyed. Whole nations of the Norman race I had extinguished, and the vessels of the Doxe of the Serene Republic were unmade.

And Gododdin was destroyed.

They would deny my marriage to Selene, say that she was not my wife, but my captive—as the graffiti in Catraeth foretold. They would say that I had raped her, carried her off like some brigand chief—like some prince of the Cielcin myself.

I shut my eyes. “Is there no way out of this labyrinth?” I muttered, stood.

“There is no way out of this but *through*.” The voice that spoke was Lorian’s. Opening my eyes, I looked at him, seated directly opposite me, glittering in black and gold.

I turned aside, saw Orphan staring silently down at me from its place at

the bole of the cherry tree, left head cocked, right fixed on me.

“It is finished,” I said, feeling every Planck second of my nearly seven hundred years. “It was supposed to be finished . . .”

Orphan’s lips—the mouth of the face not looking at me—moved in parrot to my own.

If I took the Earth, it was war. If I destroyed the Earth, it was war.

I did not want war.

I wanted . . .

“Hadrian.”

A woman’s voice. I turned, and there she was: standing with her uncle at the entrance to the pavilion. Her hair was immaculate, a shining river of red gold to her waist, cut straight across the eyes. Of gold were the rings upon her fingers. Of gold, too, were the bands about her arms, and the familiar belt of gold medallions about her slender waist.

Seeing her, I faltered. Not for her beauty, or for her sudden appearance . . . but for the color of her gown.

She wore black velvet, blacker than the night.

Black and red.

My colors.

“My lady . . .” I said, and went to her, stepping out into the light.

“Radiant Majesty,” said Lord Nicephorus, “apologies for our lateness, the Empress-Consort . . .”

I hardly heard the eunuch. Selene commanded the all of my attention. That black gown . . . it drew out the fire of her hair, so that she burned like a star herself. Beautiful as the night was she—as night and flame. And yet my blood ran cold.

Had I not seen her in like guise before, dressed in black and darkly painted?

In the vision Ushara had offered me.

“You look lovely,” I said softly, and kissed one perfumed cheek. “Will you join us?”

In the vision, that demoness had offered me dominion over every living thing. Together, we might have shattered Dorayaica then and there—on

Danu—and *from* Danu taken *Demiurge* to grind the very thrones of heaven to dust beneath our booted feet.

But Ushara was dead. And Miudanar.

That future would never be.

And yet . . . and yet . . .

I found Bassander Lin already on his feet. Edouard had joined him, as had Lorian—despite his new rank and nation. The Imperial iron rusted slowly in him, or so it seemed. Selene pressed herself against me, taking my arm in hers. Not bowing or bending, she addressed Lorian. “Supreme Commandant,” she said, “I understand I’ve you to thank for saving my husband’s life.”

A shadow passed over Lorian’s face then, and he mouthed the word *husband*. Almost he stammered, tongue racing to catch his thoughts. “More times than I can count, Majesty,” said he. Then the Imperial officer he once had been mastered the man, and he stood a little straighter. “It was my duty . . . and my privilege.” A shadow passed over Lorian’s face then, a flicker of . . . what? Fury? Surprise?

Pain.

He looked back toward my empty seat. I saw Cassandra’s brows knit, and Orphan stir beneath the cherry tree. But when he restored his gaze to the Empress and myself, he was smiling. “We were friends.” His lupine smile faltered, and Lorian pointed between Selene and myself with one long finger, back and forth. “You are wed, then?”

“We are,” said I.

Why was his voice so brittle?

“By my father’s will,” Selene said, nails biting my arm. “We will make the announcement when we reach Tenba. The formal wedding and coronation will take place on Earth herself.”

The Supreme Commandant’s hair was the color of aged bone. He smoothed it back with one hand. “I see I cannot dissuade you . . .” he said somberly, pivoted where he stood to so address the whole pavilion. “Majesty, you’ve my condolences for the death of your Imperial father, but you are making a mistake. You *all* are. The Earth . . . you’ll never take it.

We have no idea of the Chantry's full strength. They concealed Earth's condition from the wider galaxy. Their use of daimonic intelligences. What else might they have concealed? If you will not destroy it . . . I cannot help you."

"Lorian . . ." I advanced upon the fellow.

I towered over him, a cubit and more. But the Supreme Commandant was undaunted, he thrust his chin at me, said, "Don't *Lorian* me, *Hadrian*. You have *nothing*, nothing but this ship!" He spread his hands, gestured to Kaim-Olorin and Bassander Lin in turn. "A few battered legions and what's left of the Jaddian fleet! That is all! By our estimates, the Empire lost some thirty percent of its naval power at Gododdin—Earth knows how many you lost at Forum. Nearly all the Martians are dead—a small blessing, that, as they seem to have belonged to the Chantry. Your intelligence apparatus is dismembered, your departments destroyed . . . you have . . . nothing!" His voice faltered, and he looked away.

"All the more reason we should not destroy the Earth."

Bassander Lin sat on the edge of his seat, one hand on the table, his eyes like two knapped flints. "The Chantry alone now holds the machinery we need to keep the Empire together. If we are to take the Imperium, we must take the Earth."

"Not necessarily," said Lord Nicephorus, circling the table to take its seat by the old soldier. "There are alternatives."

I gestured to Selene that she should follow, and we circled the table to the left, passing Lorian and the Jaddian contingent, Edouard, and Cassandra. Selene lay a hand on the other woman's shoulder as she passed, and Cassandra clasped it in her own a moment.

Lorian did not resume his seat, grasped the back of it with both hands, eyes hard and sharp where they glared at Lord Nicephorus. "Such as?"

The Lord Chamberlain looked at me. It took me a moment to realize it was asking for my permission. I nodded.

Nicephorus fixed its eyes on the intus, said, "The royal bloodlines."

"The royal . . ." Lorian's voice trailed to silence.

Kaim-Olorin understood the androgyn's meaning at once. "The palatine

genetic keys.”

He was Jaddian. The Jaddian people had defined themselves by the act of seizing their own genetic destiny, wresting control from the Empire millennia ago. That act of Imperial carelessness had lost the Jaddian provinces, created at first a rival, then an unsteady friend at galaxy’s edge.

“The High College has control of the Imperial bloodlines,” said Lorian, whose own birth had not been approved by Imperial order. “They were on Forum.”

Nicephorus shook its head. “The genetic keys are too valuable to be kept in any one place,” it said, “else the loss of Forum would mean the death of the palatine caste in its entirety.”

“Oh no!” said Lorian, clapping a hand over his heart in mock distress.

Nicephorus’s eyes narrowed.

Selene laid a hand on the table before the eunuch. “We have control of the keys.”

“You do?” Prince Kaim sat a little straighter. “All of them?”

I held up my hand again, displaying the Emperor’s rings.

“The great houses will not dare rebel,” said Nicephorus. “We hold their children hostage from now until the end of time.”

The Jaddian shifted—Serpico and the prince especially—but Lorian said, “Unless they wish to suffer *my kind*, you mean.”

Nicephorus looked at the intus as though he were a rotting corpse.

“It will be a small thing to buy the loyalty of the great houses,” Selene said. “We will simply grant them all license to bear children. Every one of them. Three children, each.” She raised a hand with the thumb and two fingers upraised. “Part of the jubilee to celebrate my husband’s coronation.”

“And the victory,” said Nicephorus.

“You should release the keys,” said Captain Azhar.

“At least extract oaths of allegiance from them first!” Lorian said. “Give them nothing without first *taking*. You won’t win every house, but every house that declares for you for the sake of their generations stands to face the Inquisition if you lose. The Chantry will cull each and every one of those children . . .”

Selene's face was white as death, and I laid my hand on hers.

"That won't happen," I said.

She drew her hand away, folded it with the other in her lap.

"The great houses will need reminding that the throne—not the Chantry—holds the power of life and death over them," said Nicephorus.

"And you are having this power now?" asked Admiral Serpico. "Even here?"

Nicephorus pursed its lips: a small, tight smile.

"But how?" asked Kaim-Olorin.

"We have the means," said Nicephorus, not really answering.

The Jaddians had won their independence when the genetic codes for their constellation of related houses fell into their laps—a lapse of Imperial security. They had rebelled, acting quickly, developing their clone armies to rise against the Solar Throne. That would have been around the time the bunker on Cynon was constructed, I guessed, and guessed that the network that managed the genetic constellations—whose keys William had caused to be placed into my hand—had been constructed as a direct consequence of the Jaddian uprising. To tell the Jaddians—of all people—what they had done . . .

The Jaddians had been the Empire's staunchest ally in the war against the Pale . . .

The wind was changing.

"The Emperor must put his seal on every birth," I said.

"That's impossible!" Lorian objected. "There must be . . . what? A hundred thousand houses? The Emperor cannot possibly manage so many."

"The High College manages the hard work of maintaining the Imperial bloodlines, but the *seal* is the Emperor's," Nicephorus explained. "The keys are in his blood."

Kaim-Olorin shut his eyes. A noise of understanding escaped him, like wind from a teakettle. "Mutation by design," he said, grasping the science more quickly than I had done—as befit a Prince of Jadd. "The mutations aren't a side effect of your breeding program. They're intentional."

"Yes."

“You use a retrovirus to gene-edit every palatine child.”

“A suite of retroviruses,” said the Lord Chamberlain, “all derived from the Emperor’s genetic code. Without the right virus, the right key, the children are born—”

“Like me,” Lorian spat the words, looked like he might spit in truth.

“We are all the Emperor’s children,” said Nicephorus, smiling at the intus. Every *trueborn* palatine scion had one or two of the Emperor’s genes—inserted, not at random, but in a way that disabled the constellation of genes that otherwise guaranteed that any child born to the lords of the Sollan Empire would be a mutant . . . or a corpse.

“I’m not.”

“Nor am I,” said Cassandra.

“There is more,” Nicephorus said, raising a hand. “The Emperor’s whole person is required. The codes are encrypted. There’s no way to know which code belongs to which house without a second set of keys. There are epigenetic markers. Biometric scans: Handprint. Veinprint. Voiceprint. There are passwords—”

“This is insane,” Lorian said, visibly appalled. His life, his sickness, had all been a side effect of this mechanism to keep the Emperor on the throne, to protect the Emperor from the Chantry. From a coup. Seeing his horror, I felt sick, felt sicker still at the thought that to take the throne, I would have to rely upon that very mechanism.

“It has thousands of years—” Nicephorus replied.

“How?” Lorian snapped. “What do you do if the Emperor dies? You must have fail-safes.”

Kaim-Olorin waved this objection aside for the distraction it seemed, not then guessing its crucial importance. He turned his eyes on me. “William made *you* the Emperor.”

They each saw half the painting, but neither the whole thing.

“Not *really*,” I said, not knowing where to start, “not yet.” It had not been possible to fully effect the transfer of power, not from *Aurora*, and while we might have begun the update process from Cynon, we had not.

William had feared to set his plan in motion too early, to reveal it—even to Selene and myself.

“I am.” The words were like a shot, like a thunderclap.

Nicephorus’s smile was gone. It eyed the Prince of Jadd with cold serenity, eyes hard and radiant as gems.

“You?” asked Lorian.

“What is this?” Kaim-Olorin shook his head, uncomprehending. “You are . . .”

“A slave? A eunuch?” Nicephorus leaned back in its seat. “I am his clone.”

“His *what?*” asked Captain Azhar, gray faced.

“Forty-four of forty-six chromosomes identical,” Nicephorus said. “Many of the palace androgyns are.”

Bassander’s mouth hung open. Amatorre’s plastinated face was unreadable, a death mask. Lights blinked on the console that housed Prytanis’s outsized brain.

Lorian mouthed the word *many*.

Nicephorus restored its attention to Lorian. “You asked after fail-safes, Supreme Commandant. I am one.” It licked its teeth, hesitating just a moment. “The last.”

“The last?” Lorian looked at the androgyn in mingled horror and wonder.

“William and I gave the order to terminate the others before we left *Aurora*,” it said. It raised hairless eyebrows. “You see our leverage?”

“But the epigenetic markers—” said the Prince of Jadd.

“The system will recognize me as William, rest assured,” said Nicephorus. “Once we reach Tenba, I can begin the process to transfer holding to Lord Marlowe here, but for the moment, William remains Emperor and I . . .” It paused, eyes shut against the loss of its friend, its brother, its other self. “. . . am *he*.”

“Does the Chantry know this?”

“The Chantry believe Lord Marlowe is now the key,” said Nicephorus. “Because that is what we wanted them to believe.”

They had known the Chantry were listening, those final moments. Though he was dying, his body racked by terrible disease, though the battle raged about us, and whole worlds burned . . . William had played the game to the last. To *his* last.

With his dying breath, he had placed the Chantry—the whole Imperium—in check.

Lorian laughed. Harsh and bitter was that sound, the deranged noise of a hyena. He put a hand to his eyes, wiped up toward his forehead. “This is madness . . .” he said again. “This is your plan? This is how you mean to hold the Imperium?” He looked from the androgyn to me and back again. “Hostage?”

“You have seen the destructive power of this ship, Lorian. You know what it can do, what I am now capable of . . .” I stood, addressed the table all at once. “I cannot use that power again. None of us can. Not on Earth. Not at all . . . The war is over. It must be.”

“What are you saying?” Lorian asked.

I looked down at Nicephorus, at Selene, turned to look at Edouard, at the Jaddians, at Cassandra last of all. “This ship must be destroyed.”

Silence.

Lorian’s smile froze on his face. “You’re serious?”

“You said it yourself,” I said. “We cannot risk these weapons falling into the wrong hands.” I laid a hand on Selene’s shoulder. She caught my wrist.

“This ship is your best asset!” Lorian objected. “You are throwing away the throne!”

“I do not *have* the throne,” I said, looking at Nicephorus. “I will take it, if I can, but I cannot risk this ship falling into the wrong hands!”

A shadow fell upon me then, and a roar like the howl of some gargantuan beast filled the pavilion. Before I understood what was happening, before I could turn or access my vision or draw my sword, a hand seized me.

A *giant* hand.

It seized on my leg, tugged the leg out from under me. I am pleased to say I did not yell.

“Liar!” The word filled all the air of that garden, black and deep.

“Betrayer!”

Selene screamed. I struck something as I flew through the air—one of the gilded tentpoles. The whole pavilion tipped, samite roof collapsing. The men and women at the table all scrambled as the tent fell in on them. But I had been pulled free, and the ground of that little paradise hung over my head.

“Usurper!” roared that black voice once more.

The white voice answered it. “You promised it to *us*!”

“To me! To me!”

Orphan beat its breast with its two left hands, faces slaving, each white with fury.

It held me by my ankle, held me inverted, so that its faces peered each then into mine. Each head was nearly twice so large as any human head should be, though when it leered, I saw its teeth were of ordinary size. I had known that, had observed it a thousand times. But the fact of it filled me with horror then, and its breath was a vile rot. I had grown so used to it, so comfortable . . .

. . . I had forgotten what it was.

A cambion. A daimon in human shape, huge and hideous.

“It is ours!” Orphan said. “Ours, *Father*! It is for us! Our mother made it.”

“My mother!” the castrato wailed. “My own! My maker!”

“We did what you asked!” the dark-haired head exclaimed.

“What you wanted!”

At once the hand that held me let me go, and I fell headfirst on the rough ground. The pavilion at my back was a writhing mound, and the Excubitors were rushing round it. Orphan would not survive. Not escape their blades. “Hold!” I shouted, thrust a hand in the direction of my inhuman guards. “Your Emperor commands you to hold!”

For that mercy, Orphan kicked me between the legs, kicked me with every erg of strength in it. My vision went white. I did scream then, cried out—brief anguish.

“It will pass,” the giant said.

“Shall I tell you what it’s *for*?”

“On your knees!” shouted Kithuun-Annaz, and I knew a hundred Irchtani rifles were aimed at the giant’s chest. I tried to stop them, tried to speak. But the wind had left me. My lungs sucked vacuum, would not suck air at all.

“I have served,” Orphan spat, “all my—”

Bang!

A shot. A sound. A spray of blood.

Red blood.

Man’s blood.

The blood of Earth.

The black-haired head fell limp, the white screamed. I saw the exit wound, the back of Orphan’s right head was gone. The giant staggered, went to one knee, and turning my head, I saw its killer.

Lorian Aristedes had won free of the fallen pavilion. Barely. He was on his back, had scrabbled out from under the fallen canopy. He still held his weapon steady, the needler with which he had killed Cassandra in the nightmare of other time, the same needler with which he had proved I was myself.

I looked away.

He had sealed our fate. Even if I’d wanted to salvage *Demiurge*, it was too late.

None but the giant could fly it.

Was it all providence? All part of the Quiet’s plan? He had caused the machines of old to build the Archontic weapons to slay the Watchers . . . and they had been slain.

What was given had been reclaimed.

Orphan was still kneeling, though blood poured from its shattered skull. As I came to my own knees, the gold crown that black head wore toppled, tumbled over the roots of that tree watered with the beast’s own blood.

“No!”

Despite the pain in my body, I scrambled toward the giant, half making

it to my feet.

“Orphan!”

“It hurts!” said the surviving head. “It . . . mother! Father, why?”

“Orphan!” I seized the beast’s hand—one of the left.

For once, I did not correct the wretched thing, and held its hand the tighter.

The eyes of its white-haired head turned on me, seemed to see *through* me. “You! My . . . me! I’m dead!”

“I know!” I said. “I know!”

“You . . . lied!” Tears shone in the giant’s eyes. “You . . . promised me. My ship! Mine!”

“I know,” I said again. “But what we did . . .”

“We did what we were made for,” Orphan said. “We . . . *served*.”

It toppled, fell hard on its murdered side. Blood and brain fell upon the tree roots, and the eyes of the half still living tried to focus on my face, found something a thousand miles away.

“I know that, too,” I said, still holding the monster’s massive, many-ringed hand.

My vision blurred. There was nothing to be done, nothing that could be done.

Only the past is written.

Time runs down.

“You did well,” I said, and laid a hand on the giant’s still intact brow. “Rest now.”

“It . . . hurts . . .” Orphan said—those nearly had been its first words, as they were nearly its last.

Certainly it hurts, I’d said that first time.

“I know,” I said then, and squeezed its hand the tighter. “It will pass.”

“You’re wrong,” Orphan said, and at last its eyes found me, sliding over my face. “The pain . . . never . . .”

Those eyes . . . which before had seen so much, saw nothing at all.

A shadow stretched toward me, and turning I saw Lorian standing at the far side of the toppled pavilion. “It would have killed you.”

I released Orphan's hand, saw Cassandra working to free Selene and Nicephorus from the fallen baldachin. I stood, thought for a moment I might vomit—pressed a hand to my breast.

"Are you all right?" Cassandra asked.

I looked at Lorian. "Now we are committed."

Selene staggered toward me, one jeweled hand on her mouth. I took her in my arms, stared past her, over her shoulder, at the little man who had sealed my fate. "We will go to Tenba," I said. "I will reveal the truth about the Chantry there, and order the great houses to join me at Earth . . ."

"And if you fail?" asked Lorian. "It will mean war."

"Then we must not fail," I said, the scent of Selene's hair filling my lungs. Her hands were pressed against me, folded as if in prayer. "But maybe it doesn't matter. The Cielcin are dead, Lorian. And their gods. Our people are avenged."

The gun that had decided the course of history vanished into its holster. "They are avenged," he said, and there were tears in his eyes. He restored his cap to his head. "Then this is the end," said he. Then he did perhaps the last thing I expected. He stood straight, his shoulders back, and stomped his foot—heels together—and beat his breast in the most-crisp Imperial salute that I had ever seen. "My Commandant."

I still held Selene with one arm, and so only raised my hand. "*Supreme* Commandant," I said. "There is a place for you—for all your people—in my Empire."

"*Your* Empire?" The wolfish grin returned, that crisp salute collapsing like a wave upon the shore. "Wonders truly do never cease . . ." He shook his head. "But no. There isn't . . ." He turned to Amatorre then, and to Prytanis. "We shall return to *Mistwalker*. I will be grateful for your assistance with our repairs, Honorable Caesar, but I intend to depart immediately."

"Where will you go?" Cassandra asked.

It was my next question.

Lorian peered up at her. "You look so much like your mother," he said; Cassandra flushed and turned away. He tucked his cane under his arm—he

no longer truly needed it. "It's a big universe, Hadrian Marlowe. I feel I've seen so little of it . . ." He smiled. "I've spent my life in service: to the Empire, to the Monarch . . . to you and your dreams. It's time I learned to dream for myself. Amatorre. Preceptor!"

"You're going to let him go?" asked Edouard, eying the little man with suspicion.

I raised my hand for peace. "I couldn't stop him," I said. "May we meet again, Lorian."

The Supreme Commandant of Roundtable Fleet smiled his brightest smile. "We won't," he said, and turning passed Amatorre and his amazons.

"Supreme Commandant," came a deep, dull voice. "Lord Marlowe, a moment." Preceptor Prytanis of the Order of Seekers After the First Truth spoke loudly, flatly, approaching on its cushion of air.

Lorian halted, his cane held parallel to the ground before him then in both his hands, his head bowed.

I drew closer to the chimeric monk, overcome, bereft, conscious of the chaos: the fallen tent, the cambion's corpse still bleeding at the base of the ancient tree. "What is it, Cognizance?"

Selene stood beside me, a creature of crushed paper, so light was her hand in mine, so fragile, still on the edge of tears.

"You know that we monitor the background of creation," said he, "that we listen to the sound of the Cataclysm, the rupture that birthed the all?"

"I do."

"The syllables of God's words are slow to form, and vast in their reverberations. That is why the greater part of my Order is scattered far, that we might spread out far enough to *hear* and *see* the full picture."

"I know."

Lights shone in the machine-monk's sarcophagus, winking like countless bright, blind eyes. Eyes that, nevertheless, saw more than even I might ever see. "What we hear is often nothing. You would call it static. A hissing. A noise. But that is not all we hear."

I waited him out.

"We have heard."

“Heard what?” Selene asked, blinking.

I gently squeezed her hand.

“A burst,” said the swollen brain. “Two spikes against the dark background. Not three days past.” As if on command, there was a beeping, clicking, grinding noise from the vate’s chassis, and a coil of thin, white paper unspooled.

Lorian approached without being asked, and tore the thing loose. Wordless, he placed the scroll into my hand. The whole thing could not have been more than half a cubit long, was perhaps two inches high. It showed a sine wave pattern in red on a white background, a graph of intensity over time. There were twin spikes, I saw, not two seconds apart, the second longer, less intense than the first, and just below that . . .

I froze, and crushed the paper in my hands.

“What is it?” Selene asked.

“What does it mean?” asked Preceptor Prytanis.

I looked at him, and at Lorian, still standing silently by. “How long ago was this taken?” I asked.

“Fifty . . . seven hours,” said Lorian, looking at his terminal.

“It is not a part of the background,” Prytanis said, “but it is very, very old.”

“How old?”

“What does it mean?” Prytanis asked once more, not answering.

I looked at the words—the crumpled printout—one more time. Selene was looking at me, and I knew Lin and the rest would hear as well. Finally, I looked to Lorian himself. “Only what you said,” I said, terror giving way to peace. To understanding. “We will not meet again.”

“But what does it mean?” asked Prytanis a third time. “Where were you —”

“It’s not a question,” I said. “It’s a reminder.”

The enormity of what I held washed over me then. The signal the Seekers had intercepted was older than all mankind, older, perhaps, than Mother Earth or her sun. It was not a part of the music of creation, but it was almost so, an echo out of eternity. A message.

For me.

“Thank you,” I said. “I understand.” It was a final mercy. A sign.

I was still on the path.

“You’re not going to tell us?” Lorian asked.

I looked back at Orphan’s body, to where my men busied themselves righting the chaos of the council. “Maybe another time.”

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CHAPTER 86

THE DEVIL NO MORE

THERE SHOULD BE RAIN, I remember thinking, watching the body as it was brought in, carried by the men of HAPSIS to the place in the garden prepared. When was the last time I had experienced rain? It must have been on Gododdin, in Catraeth—but I could not remember it. That realization knocked me out of myself, so that I felt an observer, an eidolon floating on the air alongside those few gathered by the grave we’d opened to receive the last of our dead.

Precious few had come. Precious few remained.

Selene stood by me, and Nicephorus, and Cassandra. And Neema was there, of course, uncharacteristically quiet. My Excubitors stood thereby, in ranks to welcome the funeral procession. Lorian’s people had all returned to their ships, but the Prince of Jadd remained, along with his captains and his mamluk guards—there to bear witness to the passing of an age.

The Irchtani had not come, nor had Argo and his Danuan redlings.

There was no music, no chanted prayers.

Edouard led the procession, carrying the body on a Legion medical stretcher. It was too big for it, and the white wrappings that bound the corpse like the mummy of some ancient king had been reinforced to keep the body from sagging at either end.

“Fitting,” I said softly to Cassandra and Selene, “that this ship should be its tomb.”

Then I saw them, following the bier: two figures in white, in robes fashioned from sheets taken from the medica. Their white arms wept blood black as ink from where they’d cut themselves, as did their faces, and their makeshift robes were stained with the dark of it.

Otomno and Darathama. Nearly the last of their kind—and the first.

They did not look at me.

They had asked for its body, when Doctor Farra had declared the captain dead. When I asked what they would do with it, Otomno had only looked at me, confused. “*Eka ba-Ramanthanu*,” it had said. “I belong to Ramanthanu. In death, it is mine. We must eat of it, that nothing of it remain in this world.”

You have to eat, Little Yama. The voice of Dorayaica’s mother scratched at the inner walls of my skull. I felt the Prophet’s anguish then, its horror and revulsion.

“There are new ways now,” I’d said to the captain’s grieving mate, the last living of the converts I had won at Sabratha—that Cielcin who was *Cielcin* no more. “Ramanthanu understood that.”

Elu’s ways had ended.

I had ended them.

“*Iussamnunu ataishayan*,” Otomno had said, huge eyes shining in the gloom of the medica on the day we decanted Ramanthanu’s mindless shell. *Others remain.*

“Yes,” I said. A human word, one the elder Cielcin scarcely grasped. “But their day is done.”

“What will become of us?” the *scahari* warrior asked me, and touched its mate’s—its master’s—chest.

I’d looked at it long and hard before answering, Ramanthanu still breathing on the table between us. “*Tuka ba-kousun*,” I said. “You are mine. I am your *Aeta*, and Emperor of Man besides. I slew your gods—the gods of Elu. When I go to Earth and take my throne, I will gather what remains of your kind to myself. They will bow to me, or they will die.”

Otomno had been silent then, still touching Ramanthanu’s chest. Darathama stood beside it, near so tall as I was already. Its horns had yet to develop, and it dressed in Legion undress blacks, garments baggy and ill fitting, so that it seemed half a man at least. “He still lives,” Otomno said, taloned fingers gently scratching its mate’s white breast.

“Its mind is gone,” I said. Ramanthanu had lost too much blood in its struggle with the energumens in the airlock. The man who torn its throat

with his teeth had done his work. What remained of *Mnemon* had little by way of a working medica, and no means to treat one of the Pale at all. We could not even place the captain in fugue to save its life, as the human creches aboard *Mnemon* were too small to accommodate the towering xenobite.

But *Demiurge* had healed its wounds, had knit its flesh and nurtured it long enough that the marrow of its inhuman bones—like glass—could replace the blood that violence had stolen away.

But the damage was done.

Ramanthanu had been too long without oxygen. Its mind was destroyed.

“You cannot restore her?” Otomno asked me, eyes hooded, narrowed.

“*Veih*,” I’d said. “That power is not mine.”

“But you restored yourself!”

Darathama pressed its face to its undead father’s side. It did not move, or cry—I did not know if Cielcin could cry, or if crying expressed anything like human sorrow. I laid my hand upon the child’s head all the same.

“Utannash restored me,” I’d said. “I do nothing by myself.”

“Then why does Utannash not restore Ramanthanu to me?”

“It is not time,” I said only.

In truth, I did not know. Utannash was *quiet*.

He had been quiet then, in the silence of the medica—was quiet *there*, at the Cielcin warrior’s graveside, in the garden where Valka’s false corpse lay. Where Orphan died, and Kharn Sagara was slain and broken . . .

. . . where I first had died and been remade.

Quiet. Silent.

Total and *Absolute*.

It was a fitting place for a tomb.

It is gone now. Destroyed. We abandoned it to the firestorm I had unleashed, along with all the weapons the American daimons had made—save the *Darklight* cannons only. That, too, was fitting. It was right that the weapon that unmade the Cielcin should unmake itself. It was right that the light that burned away their kind should claim the body of the first of their kind to turn away from the darkness they had loved for so long.

Edouard and the other pallbearers reached the pit, and steadily—so steadily—lowered the body. I was about to speak when Otomno let out a cry. Like the cry of the Watchers it was—high, sharp, piercing—a noise to fill creation and knock at the very gates of hell and paradise. A wordless scream. Selene shivered, and pressed herself against me. Darathama joined its mother then, wailing wordless into the night, while above, the sunfire of my star burned ever nearer day by day.

The funeral pyre for their civilization . . . and mine.

I never reached the green hills of Earth, would never reach them.

I was never meant to. I knew that, even then. I knew that I would die a third time.

I only prayed it would be the final time.

And so I bent my neck—as some poor player on a stage bends to his role—and slouched toward Tenba, my hour come at last . . .

. . . and gone.

. . .

Mistwalker departed not long thereafter, and Roundtable Fleet with it. Whence they have gone, I cannot say. I like to think that they have quit the galaxy, following one of their late Monarch's countless contingencies. I like the thought of Lorian—free at last—an explorer, man's messenger to the farther suns. I hope that he is happy, and free of the ugliness of the world. Of the Empire. Of prophecy.

Of me.

On he flared. I watched him go, silent and alone in the darkness of *Demiurge's* bridge, his ships translated by flashes blue as Cherenkov radiation to speeds unfathomable. Prytanis's message still resonated in my mind.

Seven words.

A fragment. A memory in light. Almost a part of the microwave background. An echo not of creation, but of its afterglow, a signal sent

before all life on Earth. My name. My name! He had called my name. Before the stars were formed, he'd called to me. Before Earth was raised from stellar dust, he left that message there.

Was it fated, after all?

This must be.

I knew what I would have to do, and what would come of it.

My shadow flickered and danced on the floor, on the obscene sculpture that dominated the rear of the bridge.

The pilot's throne stood empty. Orphan was dead and gone.

I would soon be dead myself. My work was done.

My fingers grasped the trailing wires, the electrodes by which the cambion communed with that dread vessel. I had never once tried to wear them, had never once tried to wield *Demiurge* for myself. I lifted one. The cable was woven from spun glass, plaited and banded. I pressed its patch to my temple.

Nothing happened.

"Honorable Caesar?"

I looked up, found young Albé standing in the mouth of the archway behind the throne. He had put on his ivory spectacles, ordered his uniform, oiled his hair.

"A2."

He straightened, became A2—not merely *Edouard*. He fixed his eyes on a place beyond me, over one shoulder. "You called for me, Lord?"

"I did," I said, and set the sensor down upon the arm of that throne which even I might not sit by right. The cloak I wore weighed heavily as I turned—a thing of black and white, not quite the auctor's cloak that I had lost, but the relic of some vanished kingdom, its collar and edges scored with runes in a tongue I could not read—and gestured for the man to join me. "Edouard," I said, softening my earlier formality, "I've a task for you, one I can trust to no one else."

The younger man blinked, advanced a pace or two. "My lord?"

How much did I dare tell him? Could I risk the whole truth?

"You know this may all fail," I said at last. "Even if we make it to Earth.

Even if we can take it . . . we may be destroyed.”

The adorator was silent.

I lay a hand upon his shoulder. “I must go to Tenba. For reasons of legitimacy, Selene must go with me. And Nicephorus, of course. I need the homunculus to oversee the genetic transition. I will take Neema as well. And Lin and the Jaddians will accompany me. I will have need of their ships.”

“You’re sending her away—”

“No,” I said, and took my hand away. “No. I have need of her.”

“Cassandra will never—”

“Cassandra,” I said, and raised one hand, reminding him that I was *Emperor*, “is strong, but she knows nothing of politics. She will need you. *They* will need you both.” I let those words hang on the air. “You *must* take them away. Go into hiding. You and Cassandra. Take Otomno and the child with you. And the Danuans. And the Irchtani. Annaz can be trusted . . .” I had reached the window by then, stood looking out over the bowsprit—that city of high towers. “It is well that Lorian is gone. If I am to claim the throne, I cannot do so surrounded by xenobites and barbarians.” I smiled, as if by doing so I might soften the impact of my words. They were poor repayment for so much loyal service. “I want you to take the black ships—all of them, if you can—and *Gadelica* and *Ascalon*.”

Edouard was silent, his reflection in the window glass pale as any ghost. “You really are going to destroy this ship,” he said, voice hushed. “I didn’t think you really—”

I turned my head, owl-like, and looked at him, feeling every inch my father’s son. When Edouard looked down, abashed, I said, “It has served its purpose.”

“My lord . . .” He took one mincing step nearer me. “Is that . . . prudent?”

One eyebrow rose of itself. “I thought that this would please you.”

“It would,” he said, words falling out of him. “It does. These weapons . . . they should not exist, but they do. The Lords of Earth, they—”

“I know,” I said. “You will take one of the *Darklight* cannons with you.

It will help keep you safe. But the rest . . .” I returned my attention to the window. “What I did . . .”

“There are more of them, aren’t there?” Edouard asked.

My own reflection faced me, mere inches from the tip of my nose. Only the white collar and runed lining of the coat shone in the glass, so that it seemed the bust of some long-dead king stood reflected there. “You know there are.” My words issued as from some other mouth. “The Archontic weapons break the laws of nature. They are . . . like lures to them.”

“But they can kill the Watchers . . .” Edouard hesitated. I could tell this line of questioning caused him pain. “Is that . . . not reason to keep the weapons at hand?”

I looked at his reflection. It pained me, the thought that I would soon abandon him and the rest to fight this second war without me, but my own abilities were as much a lightning rod for the monsters’ attentions as the Archontic weapons themselves.

“We have . . . reached the end of my visions, Edouard. There is nothing left. I do not know what will happen. Not anymore . . .”

“Then you are no better off or worse than the rest of us.”

I laughed, a bitter, much-pained sound. “Too right you are . . .” I turned, eyes wandering up toward the empty throne. “I never saw Orphan’s death. Not in any of my visions . . .”

The younger man nodded, swallowed, did not speak at once. “I have prayed for the poor creature. I am . . . not sure if it was truly a man—two men, whatever—but I have prayed for it. For its . . . soul.”

“I did not mean for it to die!” I said. “Lorian . . . did I do right, Edouard?”

Am I a good man?

The use of his right name drew an answer from young Albé like a magnet.

“God alone does *right*, lord,” said he. “There is none righteous. God alone is good.”

“God did this, Edouard,” I said. “My god did this.”

The younger man hesitated. “If that is so,” he said, “then either he is evil

—in which case you are right, and your god is not mine—or there is something here we do not see clearly . . . something we don't understand.”

“I thought I understood . . .” I faltered. Once more I turned my back on the younger man, hands clasped behind my back beneath my cloak. “But he no longer speaks to me. I am . . . alone, I—”

Almost I wept.

“It seems to me your visions were a mercy.”

“A mercy?” I turned to look at him, shocked by the bitterness in my voice. It had happened *there*, right there, where we two were standing. “A mercy? When I close my eyes—”

Light! Light! Light!

I put a hand over my face, but it did not stop the glow.

“If what you did was God's will—my God or yours, let's not argue—then you must trust you acted rightly. If your visions have ceased, perhaps your work is done.”

“It is done,” I said, knowing the time had come. I squared my shoulders, set my jaw. “We will not meet again.”

“My lord?” He didn't understand.

Or in fact, he understood me perfectly.

“Tomorrow is *farewell*, Edouard,” I said. “We both know that I will never sit the throne. I am going to Tenba to—to die *again*.” I screwed shut my eyes. Did I dare tell him about the Seeker's message? Repeat the words Prytanis and his Order found writ beneath the stars? That broken fragment?

The look on Edouard's reflected face then . . . how shall I describe it? His mouth hung open, as if his reply had rolled out and was lost. “My . . . Caesar, your work is just beginning.”

“No,” I said, “my work is at its end. The Cielcin are beaten. The Monumentals are dead—”

“The Chantry!” Edouard objected. “You said yourself that there are more of the Monumentals out there! Destroy this ship if you must—I will not miss it—but we need *you*. Your daughter needs you!”

I could not help but smile. “She needs you, dear boy,” I said, and heard

Gibson's echo in my voice. I saw Edouard twitch. "You think I didn't know?"

"My lord, I—" Was that . . . *color* in the young man's face?

"Peace, Edouard," I said, and raised a hand.

The man's stammering faltered, and after a moment's silence, he said, "I won't lie to her for you."

"I'm not asking you to lie," I said, drinking of the cool, crisp air. "I am asking you not to tell her . . . until I am gone."

Silence.

"You are right, Edouard. The war is not over. But it is for me . . ." I drew the cloak of that antique empire about myself, held it fast. "You ask about the Monumentals. The Watchers. The others . . . They are far away—for now—and may remain so. That is partly why I must go. They are drawn to me, Edouard, and so I *must* go, for all your sakes. I have done my part, and played the role set out for me . . ." My eyes wandered about the far towers of the bowsprit rising like the bars of some celestial cage, like the fingers of some unholy hand. "I have already won." I looked back over my shoulder, saw him standing there, white faced. "Earth will fall. The Empire will not survive—it is already wounded . . ." My voice trailed off, and another voice issued from my lips, one faint and far off, out of distant memory. "Tell me you desire a fig, and I answer: These things take time."

I said nothing then, not for a long moment. The younger man did not stir, but stood in solemn silence. I was glad of his presence, and of the silence—that *quiet*.

"You're not going to tell her . . . are you?" asked Edouard.

I did not look at him.

"If I . . . die—for good, this time—that may satisfy them. They may not look for you. Leastways they may not look very hard."

"She will hate you for this."

"Let her hate me," I said. "She has her own path to walk."

"What path is that?"

Those little lights away there . . . were they *Tempest* and what remained

of the fleet? So small they seemed. “Earth will fall, and the Empire with it. When they are gone, something new must take its place.”

“What something?” he protested. “You are handing the galaxy over to the Chantry.”

“Yes,” I said. “They will step into the light, and it will burn them all away.”

“I thought you were done with prophecy!” the young man said, voice bitter as tears.

“This isn’t prophecy,” I said. “It’s strategy. The Chantry have played in shadows for thousands of years. They have no idea how to walk in the light. The truth will break them . . . in time.” I redoubled my efforts then, speaking quickly: “You must have allies: The Jaddians can be trusted, leastways so long as Aldia and Olorin hold sway, but they have their own problems. The Lothrians are still a threat. You must court the great houses.”

“The great houses?” Edouard was aghast. “Nearly all of those on Gododdin backed Alexander, if you recall.”

I did. Well I recalled golden Prince Alphonse.

“The Mandari will back power—money always does—but the Nipponese might be swayed. And the Exarchs on Tiyns and Ptolemy. The Norman lords and freeholders might be persuaded . . .” A thought occurred to me, and I said, “My sister.”

“Lady Sabine?” Edouard asked.

I had never met my sister. Sabine had been my replacement, born with royal permission after my father rendered me *outcaste*. Crispin had been named the Lord of Devil’s Rest, denied progeny by the High College, but *Sabine*. Sabine was made the Countess of Caria, a newly settled world in the Outer Perseus, far to galactic south.

There must be ten thousand such houses: young, hungry, eager to make a name.

Wars end, Kharn Sagara once said to me. *War does not*.

Edouard was nodding. “My lord, my . . . Caesar, I . . .” He hesitated, one hand on his breast. “What of my people?”

“Your people?”

He was holding his necklace, that cross of beaten gold.

“The Church.”

“The Church.” I blinked at him. Laughed. “The adorators, you mean?” It was an absurd thought. A god to battle a god, a shadow of Earth’s golden past to battle Earth herself. But Edouard was adamant, his face hard. “You’re serious?” I asked, still laughing. I pressed my forehead to the window glass, felt its cool touch on my brow. “There can’t be that many of you left.”

“Not in any one place,” he said. “But across the Empire? We have billions.”

Billions.

For a moment, I entertained the thought that I might not die. I imagined that I might make my declaration at Tenba, and sail for Earth with all my forces—my allies gathered, my ships numberless as the stars.

But all the visions I had seen of my dominion were evil.

Once more I thought of Three-Faced Fate. Her many hands. Her golden thread.

“You don’t have to die, Caesar,” said Edouard.

I came off the glass, peered hard at the boy’s reflection. I still had the little scroll in my pocket, the slip of paper Prytanis had given to me, the deciphered message crabbed along the bottom edge.

Seven little words.

Marlowe! Marlowe!

How could I explain it? How could I make him understand my certainty? That last vision that was not a vision.

“This *must* be,” I said softly, gently. “So long as I live, they will hunt you.”

“They will hunt us if you are dead.”

“It’s me they want,” I said. “Me, and Selene. Cassandra is nothing to them. Only my *bastard*.” I spoke the word with a venom like acid. “They will kill you if they find you, but they will burn worlds to get at me.”

Edouard rallied. “And every world they burn will turn a hundred against them.”

Demiurge's vents begun to run, as if *Demiurge* itself were breathing down our necks. There was wisdom in the patrician agent's words. Ten thousand years of Chantry preachments cut against their truth. For ten thousand years and more, they had taught against the evils of high technology, all the while wielding arts higher and darker than any dared dream. That truth, when it emerged—and it would, as inevitably as the butterfly—it would fill the stars with hysteric violence.

Every hand would turn against them, every voice cry out . . .

I turned from him, made to leave the window, my agitation plain. One of the pilasters that framed the forward window rose before me. I'd had occasion to study it many times. Those proud forms—proceeding in spiraling levels from bottom to top—showed man's ascent from beast to godling by the alchemy of evolution, each generation coupling with the next. It was beautiful . . . and obscene, a reminder that that ship—my ship—had been conceived in evil, for evil, by minds created for things eviler still. But they had changed, been turned to good.

As had I.

"But don't you see, that is why I must go," I said, halting, one hand on the pilaster. "You weren't *on* Gododdin, Edouard. You didn't see . . ." I told him then, about the graffiti I had witnessed in the city, about the chanting of the mob. The image of me seated *on* Selene, of my face hideously caricatured.

Down with the Devil!

The Devil . . .

I found myself massaging the thumb of my left hand, that thumb which had for so much of my life borne the shining mark of cryoburn. The kiss of the ring my father gave me. Running away from my father's house, my family, I had branded myself with a permanent sign of our connection.

The Devil of Meidua.

The Devil.

Another evil. All that remained of that evil sigil was that star roughly painted by my adherents in the streets of Catraeth. In the visions I had seen. I had myself been turned from evil. The Absolute had washed even my

scars away, save those I had taken in *his* service. My wounded side. My shoulder.

I had to shut my eyes. Time had remade me, and Time's master. But not in the eyes of the world. "They will say I burned Gododdin," I said. "They will say I killed the Emperor. That I kidnapped Selene, made her my slave. They will call me *the Sun Eater*, and *murderer, traitor, usurper* . . . Every day I hold the throne will be proof of their claims, and if I destroy the Earth . . ."

Edouard at last was silent.

"Promise me you'll keep them safe," I said, rounding on the younger man. I lay my hands upon his shoulders, peered intently down into the adorator's honest face. "Promise me, Edouard."

Young Albé nodded, swallowed hard. "Yes, my—Caesar. Yes, of course."

"Time is your ally," I said. "I have lit the fire for you. Now let it burn." I looked past him then, past the throne to the door, the stair, the lift and the tramway.

Down . . . down . . . down.

Their time will come, I released the younger man. *Cassandra, forgive me*.

As if he had read my thoughts, Edouard asked. "What will you tell her?" I smiled, felt pain at every stretching fiber. "You leave that to me."

CHAPTER 87

ANARYOCH

MY VISIONS WERE ENDED, and the future—which before was lighted by visions like mighty lanterns—had turned all to dark. I was afraid. Not for myself . . . the scroll Prytanis had given me foretold my end, fixed me firmly to my place. No, it was for the children I feared: for Edouard and the others. For the Danuans. For Darathama and Otomno. For little Kit.

For Cassandra most of all.

What I feared I could not say—could not see with certainty. I never could see the future. I am not a machine, nor am I like the Watchers, or like the Absolute himself—who seated above time sees the all of it at a glance. My visions were just that: visions. Gifts. Lanterns, lighthouses in the ocean of night.

I had sailed past them . . . every one, into fear and doubt and utter darkness. Only hope was left to me—for the others, not myself. Only hope, and prayer.

Edouard was right. I had become like any other man. My foreknowledge was—had been—a mercy, a balm to soothe me, to speed me on my road.

That mercy was ended.

That mercy . . . and my road.

The time at last came for us to abandon *Demiurge*.

Ship by black ship processed from her holds, a line of vessels like paper lanterns, their engines candles vanishing into night. We watched them go—Selene, Cassandra, and myself—from a catwalk overlooking the shuttle bay, where mighty armatures like the limbs of Briareus moved ship after ship into the launch tubes. I wore the antique cloak I had taken from the vessel's storage. Selene stood behind me, clad in my darkness, while

Cassandra—who had abandoned her *mandyas*, wore what had become the Marlowe Imperial black.

A vessel fell past us, passed from one set of mechanisms to the next . . . pistons and levers, cables and gears—like the workings of some almighty clock.

“They will be safe among the Jaddians,” Selene said, one hand upon the iron rail.

A thousand feet below us, the naked stars stretched, their grasping emptiness held back only by a curtain of pure force. As I watched, this latest vessel—a baroque sculpture of black metal and adamant decorated with filigree and relief images just as black—fell slowly past us. Its ion drives gleamed blue as highmatter as they flared to life, beginning the long, slow period of acceleration that would carry the frigate far, far away from us.

“It might have been better if they had gone with Lorian,” I said.

I did not want to know whither they were bound.

“Prince Aldia will keep them safe,” said Cassandra.

She was not wrong. I trusted the Prince of Jadd, trusted in Kaim-Olorin. There was nowhere in all creation that I might send my refugees, unless it was into darkness and the unknown. I had contemplated precisely that, contemplated interring the men of HAPSIS and Sabratha, my Irchtani and the survivors of the sack of Danu—and little Kit—until such time as I could recall them.

But I knew the cold sleep of life in fugue was only death forestalled—no life at all. I had promised Argo that his people would not be sent from my side, but times had changed.

Their home in *Demiurge*’s watery depths was soon to be blown to atoms.

The eolderman had accepted the news with a brave face, and with much fear and trembling. He had crawled to meet me—at Nicephorus’s direction—and shuddered when he kissed my rings. His transformation shocked me.

He’d gone away, accepting, and all his salvaged race went with him.

Victor, and Hector, and little Irene.

“I almost wish I were going with them,” Cassandra said.

I looked at her. Might I win a reprieve? “There is still time,” I said. “We’ve many ships to go yet.”

But my daughter shook her head. “There is nothing for me there.”

“Jadd is your home,” I said. “Our people need a leader.”

“They have Argo.”

“Argo’s not a leader,” I said, looking sidelong at Cassandra. “Not enough of one, at least . . . You would be my regent, *Princess*.”

Cassandra twitched. “Princess . . .” She let out a long, winding breath. “*Noyñ jitat*.”

I smiled. “Your mother would hate this,” I said, and fell suddenly silent, aware of Selene’s presence at my left hand, and of Valka’s shade standing between us.

If mention of Valka disturbed her, she gave no sign.

“I’m not sure I like it, either,” Cassandra said, gripping the stump of her arm. “*Princess!* Great God of Fire! But no . . .” She looked at me. “What would I do on Jadd? Petition the prince for aid? Argue with Imperial diplomats?”

“Fend off assassins, most likely,” said Selene, laying a hand on my arm.

The turn and grinding of machinery above our heads heralded the arrival of the next ship. Countless *uthras* clambered over the hull, over the arms and gearworks that lowered the ship into the launch flume. Our Excubitors stood by, blades ceremonially drawn, alight before their mirrored faces.

“You make a fair point,” I said to the Empress-Consort. *My consort*. “It’s better . . . for now . . . if we’re all scattered to the winds.”

Whatever home there might be, for Cassandra and the rest . . . they would have to find for themselves.

“*Madha es?*”

Cassandra had caught me staring at her, and something of my sorrow must have shone on my face. “It’s nothing,” I said, glanced at Selene, felt the latter’s nails bite my arm.

“We have to act quickly,” my Empress said, “take as much of the board as we can before the Chantry can move . . .”

In labyrinth chess, it was possible—not easy, but possible—for one player to stall the other out of a turn by the strategic transformation of the board. By opting to shift the walls of the labyrinth instead of moving a piece, one might temporarily forestall one’s opponent’s ability to respond. The skilled player might thus successfully box his opponent out of not just one, but two—even three subsequent maneuvers, permitting the rapid development of his side while the other stood still, utterly unable to reply.

Such was our hope, Selene’s hope, my hope—despite the message from Prytanis.

“They are already moving,” I said. “They will have had some warning, some knowledge of what happened at Gododdin . . .”

“You think they’ll be waiting for us?” Cassandra asked.

The air crackled with electricity, the noise of highmatter burning cold fire.

“Possibly,” I said, “but it is a risk we have to take. Tenba is our best chance. If we are to claim the throne . . .” I shook my head.

“Can’t we just . . . broadcast from *Tempest*?” Cassandra asked. “Use Lin’s telegraph?”

Selene shook her head. “It won’t have the right connections. We need the civilian and diplomatic broadcast nexus on Tenba. Going all the way to Ptolemy would be better—it’s more central—but by then we’d do as well to make straight for Forum, ah—” She remembered, belatedly, that Forum was gone.

“The Danuans will be safe on Jadd, at least,” I said. “Those poor people have suffered enough.”

We had awakened a handful of those afflicted by Ushara’s shade in the wake of the Battle of Gododdin. Like the Jaddians aboard what remained of *Mnemon*, they showed no sign of the monster’s continued presence, as though the light that had annihilated Ushara had burned all her darkness away.

Not all. I had to stop myself. The memory of what they had suffered in the escape from their homeworld would remain with them, all the days of their lives. What they had suffered . . . what many of them had done. I still

remember one of Ghoshal's men—one of those who had raped and murdered poor Laxman—who when thawed for examination would not speak, only curled up on his mat and wept, hugging his knees. A Danuan woman who had put out her own eyes and had them restored as we had restored Argo's smiled and nodded when I spoke to her, but would only answer every question put to her the same: "*I'm all right*," she would say, would say repeatedly, "*I'm all right*."

Even poor Captain Azhar—who had known the touch of Ushara's frigid fingers for the barest instant—was a gray-faced shadow of his former self, the fire in him stamped to cinders.

"They may fall beneath the Chantry's notice," I said soberly, "long enough to live their lives, at least." I prayed that Victor, Hector, and little Irene would be dead of old age by the time the Chantry took notice.

"But they'll be watching Jadd," Selene said.

"If they don't declare war on it . . ." I said darkly, turning my eyes on Cassandra. "I guess it is better you're not going . . ." Again I hesitated, teetering on the brink. Was it time? I took in a sharp breath, smelt Selene's floral perfume.

I wanted to talk to Cassandra alone.

"How long until the ship is emptied?" Cassandra asked.

I looked at her, *really* looked—knowing it would be nearly the last time. It was all I could do not to break then and there, to shatter into ten thousand tiny pieces. Only Gibson's words, dull nostrums, their effectiveness worn down by centuries of overdose, held me then together.

Grief is deep water. Grief is deep water.

Swim, you old fool.

An *uthra* scuttled by, feet like fingers *drum-drum-drumming* on the deck plates as it hurried by.

Too soon, the answer was.

"Edouard estimated another six . . . seven hours."

"You're really going to destroy it, then?" Cassandra's disapproval was plain.

"Yes," I said. "As soon as we're away."

“You know I think this is madness,” she said. “Your man Lorian is right. We’d do better to destroy the Earth, and damn the consequences.”

“And how many innocent lives would we destroy along with it?” Here Soonchanged had spoken of *hill tribes* above the ruins of ancient Rome, of the girl his father had captured to make a man of the boy he had been.

A proper Sabine.

There were people living on Earth still. Those not bound to the Chantry. Could I destroy them?

“I did not destroy Gododdin,” I said. “The Cielcin spared me that torment. I did what I did for the good of the galaxy. For the good of mankind. Destroying Earth would be for our sakes.”

And my visions had ended. My work was done.

The Absolute had commanded me to do what I had done. Destroy the Cielcin. The Watchers. Destroy Gododdin’s sun.

He had not commanded me to burn the Earth and all its people.

And so I could not. Would not.

Seeing the look of consternation on my daughter’s face, I softened. “The Chantry will not stand, Anaryan. Everything ends.”

The ship that was passing ratcheted through a set of changes, processed down the launch way. In a moment, those numb iron hands would let it fall.

“I do almost wish I was going with them,” I said, not looking at either woman. “I would have liked to climb Hephaistos one last time. See the old house, and Master Hydarnes again.” But I would never again know the taste of cherries, smell their perfume mingling with the fumes of burning stone, or watch the steam rise from our lagoon where the fires of the mountain were quenched. I would never again see dear old Aldia, or walk with him in the garden to the music of laughter and of singing flowers.

But all those good things *were*, and some—at least—would endure.

“We will, one day,” Cassandra said, “we’ll go back together. All of us.”

I looked at Selene, feeling then that I must break in two.

I let go of the rail, and extricating myself from Selene’s grasp, I staggered four or five paces along the overlook, watching the black ships falling into space like obsidian into ink.

So too my heart.

“This could all fail,” I said. “We may all be dead before long.”

Cassandra hardly hesitated. “Then we will see Amma together.”

“Not yet.” I kept walking, forcing the both of them to follow. A gout of steam escaped the hissing machines above, and the black ship fell away, hypergolic engines pushing it out into silence. “Let’s not be too quick to throw our lives away . . .” My hand found the little scroll, the printout Prytanis had made for me. “Come. There is yet work to do.”

• • •

Of all the partings in my life, there was only one more painful. But it had to be, must be. O, Cassandra, wherever you are, understand: The path I have walked since our parting was for all our sakes. What I have done I did for you, for them, for all mankind. Of the journey that brought me back to Colchis I shall say nothing, for no words are there to describe it—and none would believe me. Not even you.

But it is done. It is done . . .

I thought I would never see you again.

It is possible I never will . . . but I have looked for you, dear daughter, in the days and years since my return.

I have so much to tell you, so much that you—and only you—will understand.

But if I never find you. If we never speak again . . . know this: Your father loves you, and your mother loves you, and I am so proud of the woman that you are. I pray that you are well, that you are strong, that you . . . understand.

I will not remain long at Colchis. My tale is nearly done, and when it is finished, we will leave these pages in the royal archive—my archive, in a sense—and depart. A record of my struggle, my rule . . . and of myself. When I left you upon *Demiurge*, I thought only death awaited me. I thought my task was done. I know now that it shall never be.

I have played the scholiast long enough.

And if we are fortunate, it may not be long before these pages are found, and you and I may meet again. Until then . . . there are endings, Daughter, and this is ours . . .

Do you remember it as sharply as I, Anaryan? *Ascalon* waited, stood in the center of that cavernous hold . . . You believed that we would board it together, and follow the black ships and the Danuans into exile and the night. You had gone ahead of us, to help Edouard with the last of the packing and preparations. Selene—unbeknownst to you—I had sent to the shuttle that was waiting to carry the two of us to *Tempest*, to Tenba, and our fate.

So we were alone. Could be alone.

The vast doors of the hold stood open, and the burning stars peered in. Could you feel them, as I felt them? As so many eyes burning, burning far away?

Can you feel them now?

You must have heard me coming, my boots like bells on the floor of that goliath chamber. I saw you emerge at the head of the ramp, descending from shadow, your hand on the piston. So often have I thought how much you look like your mother. In those final moments, you looked just like yourself. I used to wonder why it was you refused a new arm. At first I thought it madness. I am your father. I wanted you whole, healed . . . I never wanted you hurt. I wanted you never to have *been* hurt. But that hurt is yours, and you wear it proudly. That is why you cast aside your *mandyas*, is it not? I thought then that it was a sign you had abandoned that piece of yourself that always meant so much to you: your Jaddian inheritance.

I know better now.

It concealed your hurt, that badge of honor . . . of triumph, which you will wear until the Absolute washes all hurt away . . . Would I have chosen the same in your position? I *was* in your position, but I was not given a choice. Sagara restored my stolen hand to me before I could gainsay them both. Such had been the will of the Absolute. Had I the choice, I think I would have taken it, rather than borne it with pride.

Pride.

You are better than me, I think. I hope. That is all a father can hope for. That his children might be—might become—better than he. That is why I have fought, dearest daughter, why I have done . . . *all* that I have done.

For you.

It is why I had to leave you then.

To set you and the others free.

“Where is Selene?” A simple question. No simple answer.

“She isn’t coming,” I said, and stopped some ten paces from the foot of the ramp.

I saw how your posture changed. Your hand fell from the piston, your face—which before shone like beacon—became a thing shuttered and closed. How I hated that. That I had done that. Your voice, when it returned, was a thing tight as piano wire, and just as cutting. “Where is she going, Abba?”

“To Tenba, on the *Tempest*,” I said.

Your eyes narrowed, and you turned aside, presenting your sword arm. “You’re sending me away.”

How could I answer? How could I make you understand? Cut through your armor, your shield? Should I admit it? Deny it? Say either *yes* or *no*?

“After everything,” you said, voice harsh, sharp, shattered. “After *everything*? You’re doing it again.”

“No,” I said, and felt the ice crack beneath my feet. I saw your face grow dark, and righted myself, speaking with greater force. “No. No, Anaryan—”

“Don’t you *Anaryan* me, Abba!” you snarled.

“I need your help!” I almost shouted, voice ringing in that echoing place. “We have work to do—you and I—if we are to win this.”

That gave you pause. You hesitated, wondering. I saw your eyes widen—just the barest bit. “What?”

“I need your help,” I said. “We’re outnumbered, out-positioned. We have no allies. No friends save Jadd . . .” I hesitated, felt the scroll Prytanis had given me in my pocket. “That must change. I need you . . . to change it.”

“Allies?” You shook your head, hair falling into your eyes. “I am no diplomat.”

“You will take Edouard with you.” Again I hesitated, knowing what it was I said. “He is a good man.”

Well I marked the way you stiffened, defensive, expecting some word. When none came, you turned your face away, still holding yourself. “He is.”

“He will be a great help to you,” I said.

“Why can he not go?” you asked.

“Because he is not my child,” I said. “*Princess of the Imperium.*”

The way you looked at me then. The pain in your eyes. Your smile . . . I will never forget it. You were still standing above me, halfway up the ramp. You cursed, and turned away. “You want me to . . . what? Sue for aid? Beg? Give some prince my hand in marriage, is that it?”

“You’ve given your hand already,” I said. “No. I need you—look at me! I need you to do what I cannot. To go where I cannot be. To carry my banner. To speak with my voice . . .”

You blinked. “Auctor?”

“Auctor.”

You swallowed. “I . . .” Your words had fled. “Abba . . .”

“Our hopes hang by a thread, Anaryan.” This time you did not challenge your name. “Edouard believes there are allies to be had among the lesser houses. We need men. Ships. Weapons. The numbers, but also the *territory* to resist the Chantry. We need to act strategically. Control the board.”

In chess, the game is over when the king is taken. In life, the game never ends—not so long as the board endures. So long as the king remains—the Emperor—it is chess as the masters understand it. The Lords of Earth. We will never beat them, not at their own game. That is why I went to Tenba. To take myself off the board, Cassandra. To change the game entire.

The game we play now—the game that you are playing—they have never played before.

“Where shall I go?” you asked.

“To Caria,” I said. “To my sister.”

“Lady Sabine?”

You looked surprised at the suggestion. I understood. I had never met my sister, had hardly spoken of her. She was a stranger to me. But she was Countess of Caria, a rainswept, windy world in the Outer Perseus, between Sabratha and Jadd. “Who better?” I asked. “There is no one better situated to gain from our position. My ascendancy has made her royalty. She will help us, if she wishes to remain so.”

“Can we trust her?”

Steam rose from our dear old vessel like smoke from the nostrils of a dragon. I watched it rise toward the distant ceiling. “My father was no true believer,” I said. “He wished me to enter the Chantry, you know? Not from piety, but because he wanted the advantage. His hand on a lever of power. A Marlowe in the clergy . . . how different things might have been!” But I hadn’t answered your question. I smiled. “We can trust her to see her advantage.”

You were nodding, took three careful steps down the ramp—heels ringing. Hard-eyed, you looked at me, said, “And if we can’t trust her?”

“You’ll do what you have to do,” I said. “You know the game we are playing?”

You did not answer at once. “Guerilla war?”

“We cannot sail on Earth from Tenba directly—certainly not without this ship.” I looked up, admiring the vaults above us both. “We cannot retake Earth as we are. We need allies.” You were looking at me, standing now at the base of the ramp, a look on your face I can scarce describe. I knew that it was love, Anaryan, and it smote my heart.

Every word I said was true, but I said it for you, because *you* would have to take up the fight when I was gone. To don my mantle. Not the crown—that is tarnished, far fallen from its former value. No, your seat is now one higher, set above the Solar Throne itself.

It was what I did *not* say that wounded me, haunted me.

That you would go on alone.

Not alone. I had to correct myself. *Without me.* You would have to go on

without me, into that same fear and doubt and darkness. That place where even I cannot look.

The future.

Again I felt Prytanis's paper in my pocket.

My summons.

My master had called me home.

I drew out my hand, offered it to you, palm down. "Walk with me?"

Silent then, you took it, and together we circled *Ascalon*, moving from stern to prow, toward the open bay doors, where the static field hissed, holding back the void. I stopped, looked out upon the stars. "There are more of them out there, Anaryan," I said. "I can see them, even now."

"The Watchers, you mean?"

I held your hand fast, knowing—did we both know, then?—that it was for the final time.

"They have not seen us," I answered. "Not yet. But they will. It is . . . only a matter of time."

"We should not destroy this ship," you said. "The weapons—"

"That is not what they were for," I said, and looked at you. Your eyes were on the stars. "Why did you not restore your arm?"

The slash of that question cut you, and you looked at me. "You know why," you said.

"Because you believe," I said, "because the Absolute will restore your arm in his time, or he will not."

You pressed your lips together.

"He gave us this ship," I said. "When the time comes, he will give us what we need."

"We didn't use even half the weapons in the Arsenal," you said.

"I know." Of all the arguments for sparing *Demiurge*, that was the one most persuasive. "The fight is done."

You shook your head, tore your hand away. "The fight is just beginning!"

"A new fight," I said, and said too much. "My war is over."

"Your war? Abba, you are the Emperor!"

“I am,” I said, returning my gaze once more to the abyss. It was cold in the hangar, and I drew my cloak about myself. “I am . . . and it is the Emperor’s will that this ship should be destroyed. You have faith your arm will be restored to you. Keep that faith.”

That at last set you on your heels, and you drew away.

In the dark beyond, giants stirred, their shadows vast as solar systems, their reach long as starlight. I shivered—and this time not with cold. My hand clenched around Prytanis’s missive. The oracle of the Absolute. They would find me, I knew. And they would come for me. And for the weapons that had unmade their kin.

If I did not act. If I did not go away.

“Caria won’t be enough,” you said, voice brittle as dry bones.

“Edouard has his list of worthies . . .” Again, I hesitated. I did not want to go. “Will you do it?”

You did not answer at once. You drew back alongside me. My Shadow. “I meant what I said, Abba,” you said to me. “Never again.”

“This is different,” I said.

It wasn’t.

It was.

“I cannot do this without you,” I said, and turned to you at last, taking your hand in both of mine. Still, I could not look you in the eye, for fear of what I might see there, or of what you might see in mine. The judgment. The deception. The pain. “You are my daughter . . .” I moved one hand to your face and, smiling, kissed your brow. I wanted to tell you about the future I *had* seen. About Ragama’s trial. The temple. The egg. The choice I’d been given. All that I had suffered . . . for love of you.

But I know you could never understand. You have no child of your own.

Not yet.

“I love you, Anaryan.”

“Good,” you said. At last I saw your face. You were crying. I was crying, too. “You’d better.” Just then you struck me, full in the chest. Not hard.

I laughed.

“Quite right,” I said, and sucked in one ragged breath. At last I drew one of the Emperor’s rings from my finger. Bright gold it was, with a ruby red as blood. I pressed it into your palm, kissed your hand. “Auctor,” I said, “and princess royal.”

Once more, you cursed, and closed your hand over the weighty thing.

Then looking round, I spied a figure standing at the base of the ramp up into *Ascalon*, and raising a hand, I gestured for him to approach.

Edouard stopped short, saluted. “Hail, Caesar.”

I returned the gesture, smiled through silent tears. “Is the ship ready?”

“Yes, lord.”

“The others are aboard? Otomno and the child?”

“Yes, my lord.”

I hesitated, blinked back tears. Did you know? You must have known . . . some part of you, at least. Your face was grave. Pale marble. And the smile on your face cut sharp and deep. “I will see you again,” you said.

A question?

“Yes.” I inhaled sharply. A lie.

How many times had I seen your death? How many thousand times?

I would never see your life.

I choked, managed, “I will miss you, Anaryan.”

You smiled, and your mask broke . . . for just a moment. “I won’t fail you.”

“You never have,” I said, and embraced you—dear daughter—one last time. “Go then. Until our next meeting.”

I knew then that would not be until your mother stood once more by my side.

But I let you go, and fell away, back first one step, then another. Mere cubits separated us then. They may as well have been light-years. I watched you take Edouard’s hand. He took you by the shoulder, and there was a twinge of sadness there. You will outlive him, if you have not already. Then you turned, and the both of you looked back me.

I cannot see Edouard’s face. He is a specter to me, a shadow out of

dream.

Your face is all I can recall. You smiled, and that smile was a thing all your own, free of torment, if not of sorrow.

Did you know?

You must have known.

It was not I that let you go, but you who set me down.

My journey was ending—or so I thought—while yours, dearest daughter, had only just begun. I held myself together as your ship's repulsors whined, thinking—as I watched her taking flight—of that other *flight*, from doomed *Tamerlane* long ago. I'd wept then, too, in sorrow and in pain. My sorrow then was tinged with joy, and gratitude . . . for you.

To have known you.

To be—to have been—your father, has been the greatest joy of my so terrible and terribly long, sad life.

My heart is with you, wherever you may be.

Until the end of all . . . and after it.

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CHAPTER 88

THE LAST JOURNEY

IT WAS LIKE AN empire in motion, tower upon tower, battlement upon battlement, battery upon battery flowing into night. Falling. Falling . . .

Only we were the ones in motion, the ones rushing far away, leaving *Demiurge* behind. Pale lamps lit her facia, her colonnades, her countless statued terraces, her turrets rising in the darkness. Nothing moved in that hideous desert, where even the solar winds were still.

Demiurge was falling away.

“The other ships have gone, Radiant Majesty,” said Strategos Lin, seated in the captain’s chair.

Around us, *Tempest*’s bridge gleamed, mirror-black and gold.

It was strange, to be back aboard an Imperial vessel after so long in the darkness and eldritch silence of *Demiurge*. The mere presence of the men, the quiet reports, the orders issued with calm command. The sense of normalcy, of control.

The human world.

The human *universe*.

It had become a foreign place.

“*Ascalon*?” I asked, needing to be sure.

Selene, silent, squeezed my hand. I had not heard her approach.

It was the first officer, Astor, who answered me. “At warp, Caesar. Time plus three minutes, forty-two seconds.”

Caesar. My mouth was dry.

Valka, forgive me.

“How long to safe distance?” I asked, brushing past Lin’s high seat to walk the overlook above his officers at their consoles. Ordinary men.

Already *Demiurge* half had vanished into the night. Another minute or

so and it would be gone.

“Not long,” came Lin’s reply.

“Estimated time minus four minutes,” said a junior officer from the pits below.

“I won’t weep to see the back of her,” said Neema, who had not left his place by Lin’s chair.

“Nor I,” said Lin.

But I was not so certain. Who was it said that places were but places, and held no special weight? He was a fool, whoever he was. It was upon *Demiurge* that I first died, first gave my life to the cause of man’s salvation. And it was the instrument of that salvation. It had saved mankind. From the Pale Cielcin, from their gods, from every evil save that which is in man himself.

I felt a sadness at its passing.

It was a glorious thing. Beautiful, terrible, and sublime—the culmination of all man’s striving, a Babel built by the machines that were of Babel themselves. Had I the right to end it?

I had every right, and a duty.

It was the will of the Absolute.

That what I’d done could not be done by those of my enemies I had not slain.

By lesser men.

The window at the fore of *Tempest*’s bridge was only a screen. Like so many Imperial warships, *Tempest*’s command center lay deep within her superstructure. As *Demiurge* diminished, the false vision on that screen enhanced, keeping the target firmly in its sights.

“Time minus two minutes,” said the junior man.

“Prepare the weapon,” said Bassander Lin.

The *Darklight* cannon had been mounted to the outer hull, patched into *Tempest*’s systems with roughshod abandon.

To unmake its siblings. The other Archons.

It alone of those weapons of the end of days was to be spared what was coming. The Chantry already had copies of its own, and the great houses

would surely follow. The weapon I had laid at the feet of Aurelian would change the face of war. The cannon I had given Olorin would go to Jadd, and prove the destruction of the Lothrians.

That djinni had escaped its bottle, and the galaxy would never be the same.

“Weapon is drawing power,” said a junior man below and to my right. “All checks complete.”

“All systems go,” said another.

“Time minus one minute twenty-four seconds.”

“This is the right thing,” said Selene.

I hesitated. “I hope you’re right.” Lorian’s voice was ever in my ear, in my skull, arguing caution. Counseling war.

Ten million miles at least there were between *Tempest* then and *Demiurge*. Perhaps twenty.

“Our velocity is now in excess of one percent C,” said Astor, as if answering my thoughts. We had to be well outside the projected blast radius.

Lin was being cautious.

“Time minus thirty seconds.”

Then the strategos—my Grand Strategos, for his was the command of all the legions that named me *Emperor*—spoke the fated words. “Commence firing sequence.”

“Firing sequence commencing.”

The patch that connected the Archontic weapon to *Tempest*’s simpleton computers took some time to process.

Fire at will.

“Time minus ten,” said the bridge officer.

I fixed my eyes on the false image before me, on *Demiurge* for one last time.

“Nine. Eight. Seven.”

Selene’s scent filled the air.

“Six. Five.”

My heart was hammering. Light refilled my mind before ever it filled

the monitor.

It was happening again.

“Four. Three.”

It was happening again.

“Two. One.”

Darkness invisible lanced out across the void, faster than light ever could. Space stretched, as it would stretch at the end of days, struck *Demiurge* in less than an instant, across ten million miles and more of open space. Its beam passed clear through the mighty vessel, clove hull and bulkheads and the Dewar bottle that housed the vast supply of antimatter that drove the behemoth between the stars.

The seeds of destruction. Of annihilation.

Light!

There was light—an ocean of it. The light streamed past us, bathed us in its radiance.

“Target destroyed,” Lin’s men reported.

“Can confirm,” said another. “Sensors report total annihilation of the target.”

“Very good,” I said. If he was wrong, my star would soon claim whatever shrapnel remained. “It is finished.” I looked down at Selene, found her watching me intently. “Set course for Tenba, Grand Strategos.”

Bassander Lin bent his head. “Yes, my Emperor.”

• • •

The others believed that we were sailing to victory. They believed we would impress the garrison there, enlist them to our cause, and from the Tower of Morne declare my ascendancy. They believed that there, in the Tower, I would wed Selene in public ceremony, renewing the vows we’d made in private before her father on Cynon. They believed that there I would make my broadcast public, disseminate the truth of what the Chantry

was across the datanet, ignite planet after planet with the fire and rage of my revelation.

They believed that there we would begin our march on Earth.

Our homecoming. Our anabasis.

They believed . . . so many things.

But hope, the scholiasts teach us, is a cloud. It was in a cloud we then traveled, blind to what passed in the broader cosmos. To the forces arrayed against us. To the stirrings of that dragon: Leviathan itself. But though I was then blind, robbed of the vision—the dream—that had gripped me all my life, I knew . . .

I knew I was going to Tenba to die.

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CHAPTER 89

TWILIGHT

ALARMS FILLED *TEMPEST* THE moment we emerged from warp, and I left Selene in our quarters—which had been Lin’s own quarters until our arrival—and hurried down the corridor to the tram that would convey me to the bridge.

What I saw on the readout froze my blood.

An armada was waiting for us. A hundred ships at least, the smallest of them half so large as *Ararat* herself.

The Sons of Earth had come, the Priest-Princes of the Holy Terran Chantry, the Lords of the Inner Order.

The Shadow Kingdom had stepped into the light.

And they were not alone.

“*ISV Tempest*,” came a Martian accent over the comm. I recognized the lilt at once. The upward inflection, the open vowels, “*this is Aurora.*”

Aurora.

My heart turned black as cinder, and I looked at Bassander then, aghast. “It’s not possible,” I said quickly, speaking under the recording.

The strategos said nothing, cocked his head to listen, his hands white on the arms of the captain’s chair.

“*Repeat: This is Aurora. In the name of our Holy Mother Earth and His Exalted Radiance, the Emperor Alexander VI: I greet you, and direct you and your ships to orbit and await further orders. William the Great has gone to Earth. The Emperor is dead. Long live the Emperor!*”

It was a brutal tactic, simple and direct. The only acceptable response was *Long live the Emperor!* To say anything else was death.

“He’s alive . . .” I said. But how? I had seen them, seen *Aurora* about Cynon the instant we fled the system. Realization struck me the next breath.

They had been light-minutes away.

I had seen only their ghost.

Alexander had fled. “The bastard quit the field,” I murmured, feeling the coils of the serpent winding tighter all around me.

Of course he had. They had known what it was I had intended to do; what I had fled *Aurora* to do. To remain would have been suicide—as William had intended. “They killed William,” I said, horror crawling through my bowels like some many-legged thing. *Or else they’d ensured he lived to death.*

“I have to reply,” said Bassander Lin.

“I know,” I said.

“We have the *Darklight* weapon,” Bassander ventured. “They won’t be expecting that . . .”

There it was. The choice. The moment.

The war—the new war—had come early.

“For all we know,” I said, looking at the readout, at the false-color images of tidally locked Tenba, its surface red and gray, green seas rusted round the edges, polar caps yellow with sulfur, “every one of those Chantry ships has a *Darklight* weapon aimed at us right now.”

It was well that Lorian had gone. The presence of his ships would have declared my presence loud and clearly. At once I regretted my having sent Cassandra away. But no, that wasn’t right. She was where she needed to be. It was *Ascalon* I needed.

“They will ask to board,” I said. “If they find the Empress and Lord Nicephorus and myself aboard . . .”

“I know,” Lin said.

Lin and his people might survive, might swear allegiance to Alexander. But if they were found to have sheltered me, to have abetted my escape . . . then Belusha, and worse than Belusha, awaited them. With its heat sinks and its stealth design, *Ascalon* might have escaped *Tempest* undetected, its passage betrayed only by the opening and closing of the battleship’s bay doors. *Tempest* had courier ships, fast interceptors, lesser

ships ready to deploy on a moment's notice. But any one of them would be detected at once and destroyed.

And *Tempest* would be destroyed along with it.

We had mere seconds to respond. Every moment that passed made Lin look more the guilty. "Have the Jaddians arrived?" I asked, and turning saw Selene stride onto the bridge, her jeweled feet ringing on the decking, Sir Verus close behind. A strange omen, I thought, that she should wear black and it white, while the knight was her shadow. Her eyes were wide, and from the light in them and the fever, I knew that she heard—or guessed—the contents of the Martian message.

His Exalted Radiance . . .

It was not enough that Alexander should falsely claim the crown. He had aggrandized himself in claiming it, stepping over his father's corpse to a title loftier still.

The serpent had shed its skin, swollen to greater size.

"Just ahead of us," said Bassander. "Even with their fleet, we are outnumbered."

"How did they come ahead of us?" asked Selene.

We had tarried at the rendezvous too long. It had taken months to repair *Mistwalker*, to assess our other damages, to reallocate fuel and provisions between the ships of our fleet. It had been a necessary delay, but it had cost us.

"I suspect the Chantry ships have been here a long, long time," I said.

"My Emperor." Bassander Lin's voice cut cross the moment. "I must respond."

I looked at him, long and hard. "We must assume every one of those ships has a *Darklight* cannon aimed at us, and a daimon at the controls," I said. "If we try to fight, we'll die . . ." I looked to Selene, a terrible sadness filling my chest. "We should never have come here. Anywhere else would have been better."

"This was the shortest way," she said, unknowing.

I froze, just looked at her.

"Hadrian?"

“It was . . .” I said at last, and looked to Bassander Lin. “Telegraph the Jaddians. Tell them to run.”

Bassander’s face was aghast. “My lord?”

“If they withdraw, they might make peace with the Chantry. If they stay and fight, there will be war—and not one they can win.” The Jaddians would need time. Time to build a new fleet, time to grow a new army, time to replicate the *Darklight* cannon I had given them. My final gift: *détente*, a stalemate with the Imperium, with the Shadow Kingdom that now ruled her. “And you . . .” I held Bassander’s gaze. “You have to hand us over.”

“Hand you—”

“You *have* to, Bassander,” I said. “They will kill you if you don’t, and all your men with you.”

The Mandari officer struck the deck with his cane. “They’ll kill me anyway.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but maybe not. *You* may have a chance.”

Never had he looked so weary! Atlas he seemed in that moment, his shoulders shaking with the weight of worlds.

“Reply,” I commanded. “Tell them *Long live the Emperor.*”

Lin flinched as if electrocuted. He opened his mouth, but his face fell, belief wavering for the first time I could remember. A fire smoldered in those black eyes, threatened to lance out at me as once they had so long ago. But their flame only guttered, sputtered, went out.

If he said anything else, they would open fire.

“Yes, Radiance,” he said. One rough hand reached out, tapped the call key on the captain’s console. Transmitting audio only, Lin looked directly up at me, his head bowing as he said, “Long live the Emperor.”

The Martian reply came far faster. “*Long may he reign.*”

Having lied once, to keep lying was easier. “Long may he reign.”

Lin switched off the comm. His eyes had not left my face. “They will come aboard,” he said. “They must not find you both.”

“They will find us,” I said. “You know that. They won’t send the Martians—or they won’t send the Martians *alone*. Make no mistake: The Chantry rules here—not Alexander.” I looked to Selene, whose face was

grave as stone. “That means the Inquisition. Sentinels. That means a daimon . . . for all we know it is already here.” I looked up at the ceiling, at the ship’s internal security. Every recorder, every console, every suit of armor and officer’s wrist-terminal had doubtless already turned against us.

It was over.

It had ended the moment we arrived above Tenba . . . had ended before we could begin.

When I had languished in medica after my duel with Irshan and Bourbon and Breathnach’s attempt upon my life, I had dreamed of the Arch of Titus—that Roman ruin through which the Emperors had of old begun their solitary march to coronation—starting in the Royal Wood, ending at the Solar Throne. In the dream, the arch had doubled, as though the eyes of my vision had crossed, so that the funeral procession I had joined marched through neither gate, but along some third, narrow way. As we passed, one of the gates became the arch to the chamber beneath the Dome of Bright Carvings, surrounded by the death masks of my ancestors—the devils of Meidua.

That path had closed to me so long ago, as the path to the throne closed to me then.

I would walk some other road.

Had I not always known it would be thus? I did not want the throne. I had never wanted it. But as I had not wanted Crispin to succeed my father when we were boys, I had not wanted Alexander to succeed his father. What I wanted did not matter, what I wanted had never mattered—and never would.

I looked at Selene, and pulling her to me, I kissed her brow. “I am sorry,” I said. “We will not sit together now on Earth. I should have sent you with Cassandra, with . . .” I shook my head. She knew what I was thinking.

“You think you can be rid of me so easily?” she asked, her face hard. “The others will be all right. We planned for this.” One glittering hand seized the front of my tunic. “I swore an oath to you, my lord. Whatever is ahead of us, I am with you.”

My heart broke in that moment, as it had broken ten thousand times before. I put a hand on her face, not caring that we were stood upon *Tempest's* bridge, or that Bassander Lin and his officers were all about. "I'm sorry," I said, and knew she would understand all that I meant by those words.

She smiled, and her smile brought with it sorrow and fresh pain. Her whole life had been spent in waiting, and now—at the threshold of what should have been her hour—all she had waited for was snatched away.

Turning to Bassander Lin, I said, "It will go better for you if you turn us over." I looked round the bridge, at those good and decent men—those soldiers of the Empire, those conquerors of the Cielcin, now dead. "They will strip you of command . . . but they may spare your life and the lives of your men."

Lin stood. "My lord, my . . . Emperor, I cannot—"

"You must," I said, and laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Your men depend on it. On you. And Cassandra—" I broke off, at once fearing that *Tempest* was already compromised, infested with Chantry daimons. "They will need you, Lin."

The man was a walking shadow.

"Make the call, Bassander Lin."

There was no escape. *Tempest's* engines could not make the jump to warp again, not for many minutes—minutes we did not have. We could never hold against so many, and if they were armed with copies of the Archontic weapon I had laid at the feet of dead Aurelian . . . we could not escape at all. Lin might have sacrificed himself to permit our escape, secreted Selene and Nicephorus, Neema and myself aboard a courier ship, or on one of *Tempest's* small escape pods . . . but there was nowhere to go save the planet's surface, where we would be hunted, hounded, captured at the last.

If we were not shot the instant we left the vessel.

"But you *are* the One," he said. "Not Earth's Chosen, I see that now. But Chosen all the same." He shook his head. "I saw you die. I know you died again. The throne is yours, by the Emperor's will, and by the will of—"

“Enough, Bassander,” I said, and drew myself up, speaking so that every man on the bridge could hear me. “*I am* the Emperor, Mankind himself.” I raised my hand, palm before my face, showcasing the royal rings. “What I do now, I do for *you*—for all of you. And for your homes. Your families . . .” My eyes met Bassander Lin’s, and I felt once more that old line of fire between us. “If all I achieve as Emperor is to save your lives and the lives of our people, I call that enough.” I let my hand fall, drew back a step, that I might stand nearer Selene in those final moments. “Now make the call.”

“Caesar, I—”

“I am the Emperor, Bassander!” I roared. “Now do as your Emperor commands!”

• • •

Before long, *they* came, armored all in black, their harness gleaming with pale light, a ring around the icon of Earth on every breast. The Sentinels, the Knights of the Order, of the Cult of Mother Earth. To their captain, Keriot, I surrendered my sword, my shield-belt, my terminal. He did not—to my surprise—take the rings that William had given me.

“You will give them to His Radiance,” he said. “Bring them!”

Two Sentinels closed upon Selene, seized her. So swift was their motion that she let out a cry, and Sir Verus leaped forward, blade singing to life. The Knight-Excubitor lunged toward its charge, sword flaring. The homunculus acted on instinct, obeying its programming as readily as any dog.

“Stop!” I shouted, too late.

Verus’s sword caught one of the Sentinels in the chest, highmatter precisely piercing a joint in the man’s armor. The man unhanded Selene, staggered back, arm raised as Verus hammered its blade against the Sentinel’s adamantine cuirass. The second Sentinel released Selene, lurched toward the chrome-plated knight.

The first Sentinel had fallen, blood sheeting down his wounded side.

Captain Keriot drew his pistol—the like of which I’d never seen—aimed it calmly at the back of Verus’s armored head, and fired, so close the slave-knight’s shield could not avail it. The bullet passed clean through Verus’s adamant helmet, its brain, and out the other side. Then it erupted in a fine, blue-white mist.

Highmatter.

Selene screamed, the sound of it turning to sobbing as she fell to her knees.

Keriot holstered his gun again. “I apologize if I frightened you, Your Highness,” he said, and bowed. “This was regrettable. It might have been avoided.” He had the manners of a courtier, and the instincts of an ogre. The man had not so much as blinked.

Kneeling, Selene slumped over the body of her fallen protector, head upon its breast. The Excubitor had never said a word, but it had been her constant companion since she left Latarra. A long count of years.

The captain did not stop my going to her, and I gently pulled my weeping Empress from the body of her slave, held her close until she stopped shaking.

She did not speak again. Not as we were escorted off *Tempest*, not in all the time we sat on the shuttle that carried us down to Tenba. I held her hand in mine, and was likewise silent. Even Neema did not dare to speak, seated at my other hand. Nicephorus sat slumped in its own seat, utterly bereft.

The planet Tenba had long since ceased to turn its face from its sun, so that—like Earth’s sibling, fast Mercury—one side was day forever, the other always night. Her atmosphere helped to stabilize the temperatures between the day side and the night, but there were always winds. The planet’s capital—the aptly named Meridian—lay in the belt of twilight, at the edge between night and day, where the climate was fairest. Deserts dominated the deep day, and while the night side was the more temperate, a life without sunlight was a trial for most.

The ramp opened, and the wind rushed in, lifting the antique cloak I’d taken from *Demiurge* and my hair with it. Captain Keriot went ahead of me,

his own cloak floating on the air like a living shadow. One of the lesser Sentinels tapped my leg with his truncheon, threatening action if I did not move.

I did, and Selene moved with me, Neema and Nicephorus just behind.

I did not lower my eyes, or falter, or shrink. Not when the drums began, not when the blocks of Martian hoplites stood to either side began to beat their spears against the flags. The noise of it was a tidal wave, the press of a giant boot from on high. Selene shivered, clung tightly to my arm.

A black colonnade encircled the plaza at the heart of Meridian, before the halls of government, beneath the looming presence of the Tower of Morne. We had landed almost in its center, where a statue of some prior Emperor stood, gold-crowned, the image of an age long past. Its shadow was lost in the shadow of the Tower itself: that gargantuan construction—miles tall—which rose from the rear of the palace complex. It was to that Tower my eyes were drawn, up—inexorably up—to where it pierced the clouds, a blade aimed blasphemously at heaven, as if to disembowel the very gods.

It had been intended to serve as the planet's hightower, connecting heaven and earth, but it had failed, and what had been intended as a starport had become the governor-general's palace. The halls of justice and power on that world.

That had become a nest of vipers, the abode of serpents, of Leviathan and her brood.

They were waiting for us, on the steps of the palace.

He was waiting for us, seated on the gestatory throne, that confection of red velvet and gold, his head haloed with rays like the sun. He was armored all in white, his armor that gleamed of argent adamant embossed with the relief images of Arthur and Alexander. Of snowy white was his tunic, his pteruges of red and gold, each decorated with the icon of the unconquered sun. A heavy cloak embraced him, scarlet samite embroidered with cloth of gold, a white lion skin about his shoulders.

But it was his head—what perched upon it—that most drew my attention. Gone was the open helm he'd worn throughout our time on

Gododdin, gone that soldierly affectation. In its place, he wore a crown of living gold, a diadem woven of the golden branches of the Tree of Avalon.

The Grass Crown.

He had arrayed himself as a conqueror, as a hero. This was his triumph, his final victory.

His eyes were cold.

The drumming crested as Keriot's party reached the base of the stairs, while all about the wind raised the Imperial standard on a thousand separate staffs, red sun streaming on pennons and gonfalons and pennants like tongues of white flame. Sentinels stood side by side with those members of the Knights Excubitor who had not made their escape from Forum with me. The clergy gathered about the throne, a sea of black and white—an armored Prince-Prior among them.

Alexander raised his hand.

The drumming ceased, so that for a moment all was silent, near all was still.

"We should kill you for what you have done," he said, voice amplified by praxis, projected from every speaker in the square until it seemed Apollo himself were speaking through Alexander. "You killed our father."

I had expected the charge. Still, its blast was devastating.

But more devastating still was Alexander's *we*.

"Have you nothing to say?" He leaned forward. "You will not get another chance. This is the end for you, Lord Marlowe. Your little rebellion is finished." When still I did not speak, he sat tall in his late father's chair. "Our father knew what you intended . . . and when he would not sanction your madness—when he opposed you—you killed him in his bed."

"Liar!" The voice that erupted from my ranks was Selene's, harsh and shrill as furies. "Alex, damn you!"

"Silence, *whore!*" Alexander's voice filled the plaza with scorn. "You betray your family, *our father*, for this?"

Selene positively vibrated with fury. "The Cielcin destroyed Gododdin! The fleet was nearly lost! Hadrian saved us! The entire galaxy! Father—"

"Silence, I say!" Alexander roared, hands gripping the arms of his chair

as he came forward. His whole body shook. With fury? With fell glee? “You disgust me, Selene. Betraying your family to play the trull for this maniac! Were you not my sister—”

The Prince-Prior placed an arm on the prince’s shoulder, as if to check the younger man’s rage. The prince twitched, turned his head away. He took a long, shuddering breath.

Then Alexander fixed those dead eyes on me. “There is no word for your crime. What you have done . . .” He turned his gaze aside. “It defies comprehension. Belief. To destroy a planet—a *sun* . . .” His words failed him. “You are a threat to every man, woman, and child in our galaxy. Where is the weapon? The ship that did this thing?”

I did not answer him. I simply stood there, silent as my god.

Some part of me was screaming, a very old part. It cried out for justice, screamed for vengeance, for truth.

Reader, if you only knew how many of the things which you believe are false, you would despair of all knowledge. The greater part of my education has consisted not of learning, but of *unlearning* those things which I had named inviolable, which others had called fixed, changeless, and absolute. Much of what the very wise have called *science* has proved mere speculation, much of what men called *truth* only hope. And history? Lies and distortion. Assertion after assertion, piled on assertion louder still.

But the truth exists, however buried, however lost and disregarded—however spurned.

I did not destroy Gododdin. I did not slay William the Emperor, my friend.

I *did* destroy the Watchers, and the Pale Cielcin—their slaves. I gave the order that ended Gododdin system’s sun, I allowed our fleet to pay the price—what remained of it to pay. For these things alone, perhaps, I deserved judgement.

“Where is your ship?” Alexander asked, seated in judgement over me.

“Destroyed, Alexander,” said Nicephorus, stepping forward.

The Sentinels that formed the first line of guards at the base of the stairs

advanced to check the thin homunculus, but Nicephorus raised its empty hands. The Excubitors among them did not move.

“The Emperor destroyed it!”

A shock and murmuration went through the throng at the eunuch’s words.

The Emperor? The Emperor?

Did the eunuch mean William?

Only slowly did they come to realize that Nicephorus was speaking of me. Alexander’s face darkened, and the clergy about him—that sea of black and white—rippled as though a stone had struck their surface. “And you, Uncle? You’ve thrown your lot in with this *pretender*?”

“Your father named Lord Marlowe his successor!” Nicephorus said, sending another shockwave through the throng.

“Ridiculous!” cried one lordling from the throng on the steps below the gestatory throne. “You are not of the Imperial House! His Radiance would never—”

“The Emperor’s will is known!” proclaimed the Prince-Prior, his face concealed behind an onyx mask and striped white-and-golden *nemes*. “Alexander was his son and heir. Alexander is Emperor. This”—he gestured down at me—“*provincial* is a usurper!”

His words ignited a cascade of shouting. Cries of *murderer* and *traitor* and *regicide* filled the air.

But Nicephorus was undeterred.

Perhaps it knew its life was forfeit. It was—had been—William’s only friend, his closest confidant, his chiefest counselor. Alexander’s regime could not suffer it to live. Or perhaps it simply loved the late Emperor. Its brother. Its shadow. Its other self. Perhaps it could not bear to see dear William’s legacy so tarnished. So destroyed.

“You are deceived, Lord Theudas! William was alive when I last saw him! When we last saw him!” roared Nicephorus, in a voice louder than any I had heard from the slim creature. “He named Lord Marlowe his successor! He ordered me to place his rings into Marlowe’s hands! He ordered

Marlowe to do what he did! It was William's intention to remain behind at Gododdin! To hold the line against the enemy to the last!"

Such was the force of the eunuch's words that the crowd there gathered rocked. It was as though William the Great there stood, restored to life—to health, to the fullness of his powers. Nicephorus did not look much like its clone brother. The hormonal differences, the reality of its sexless nature, and of the epigenetic changes that cascaded from that difference and from the varied stressors on their lives, had caused them to grow somewhat apart. But though one was electrum and the other red gold, the true gold was in them both, and shone in Nicephorus then.

"He was in *your* power, Alex! On board *Aurora*!" shouted the Lord Chamberlain. "If he is truly dead, he died in your hands! Get out of my way, pissant!" It shoved one of the Sentinels at the fore, made to mount the stairs.

"Uncle Nicky!" Selene called after it.

I wonder now if the creature knew what it was doing, if what seemed fever and fury were in truth cold calculation. Revenge. It was possible. The Lord Chamberlain's temper ran—if anything—even colder than the Emperor's. If William had been a man of cool waters, then Nicephorus was a glacier, a thing of grinding ice. I had seen its anger, its suspicion before—many times.

I had never seen this.

The Sentinel rebuffed Nicephorus, and the Chamberlain redoubled.

"He'll get himself killed!" Neema shrilled.

Another Sentinel advanced, struck Nicephorus in the knee with the haft of his lance. Selene choked.

"Alexander, enough!" I cried, advancing a step.

But Nicephorus rocked to one knee, thrust a finger up at the prince, its nephew. *The Emperor*. "You killed him!" it called up, "You, and you damn priests! Marlowe is the Emperor by will and right, your father—"

Bang.

The shot that split the square was like a bolt of thunder, its clap rebounding off the colonnades and the arched windows of the governor-

general's basilica. So loud was it that birds roosting high in the Tower of Morne took flight, ravens *quarking* in the ceaseless twilight. An oracle situated on the parapets might have divined an omen from whether or not the birds flew east, toward the planet's day, or west into night, and so understood what thing had just been done. But if any such priest or *vate* was there above, I never heard his oracle. But I knew . . .

I knew the sun was setting, that the birds had flown on into night.

There are those among the scholiasts who say that history is made not by men, but by nature. These same bloodless men deny that man has any will at all, and cleave to the belief that we are beasts of pure necessity, obeying the chemical impulses of our blood. There is no soul, they say, no will free from the command of hormone and genetic program. History, they say, is but a record of these mute, blind processes.

War. Famine. Plague. Flood. Fire. Climate.

These men are fools, bloodless cretins who deny the freedom of the will to excuse their own inaction. Their own vice. These forces impact history, but the real *history*, the truest tale, consists in man's response to these forces. For it is men who act. Who choose to act. And men alone.

A man had acted then. There. In that moment.

I never knew his name, the soldier who shot Nicephorus. I never saw his face, learned his history. Where had he come from? Who were his parents? What thoughts ran through his mind the moment he pulled the trigger?

Did he ever understand what it was he had done?

Alexander's face was white as death.

Night had fallen.

True night. All across the galaxy.

"Hadrian . . ." Selene said, her face white. "The keys."

I shook my head to silence her.

The fate of the Empire, of the galaxy—the doom of princes—rested then on the shoulders of that unnamed Sentinel, that man from nowhere, that man who had pulled the trigger. Though none there save Selene and myself—and perhaps Neema—understood it, the Sollan Empire had fallen.

William, in extremis, had placed the fate of the constellations of the

blood palatine on the shoulder of his friend, his sibling, his slave. And those shoulders had crumpled at a shot. I had seen the bullet on the air. Its substance dissolving in a luminous blue mist.

Highmatter.

“Who did it?” Alexander asked, on his feet. He struggled to move in the heavy cloak of samite and white lion fur, but his Martians and the Sentinels parted. “Who shot him?”

One Sentinel stood apart, presented arms. “I, Radiance.”

Alexander struck the fellow in his helmeted face. The Sentinel staggered, and when he did not fall, Alexander struck him again, and again and again. The man submitted, not daring to fight back. The prince’s chest—the Emperor’s chest—heaved as he looked round, back up the steps whence he had come. His crimson cloak trailed on the stones behind him, hem tracking through Nicephorus’s blood. “That was . . . my uncle,” he breathed, and set fingers to his own throat, as if testing his pulse.

Did he know?

He must have known. Yet his demeanor did not seem panicked. He touched the Grass Crown, adjusted its set on his brow. His hair had grown long since I’d left him on Gododdin. He looked at me a moment, face cold, hard, pained.

He drew his sword, kindled it, and wordless brought it down on the man who had slain Nicephorus—and the Imperium entire. The man yelled, and his adamantine plate endured the blow, so that Alexander was forced to hack and hew the man as a child attacks a tree with his father’s axe. After a few frenzied seconds, Alexander kicked the man, and planted his foot on his breast before pausing to place his point with care against a joint in the man’s armor. He had to hammer on the pommel to drive the blade home. When that was done, he thrust the weapon skyward, a blade of light to answer the dark tower looming above us all. “You see!” he said, as if he had not made himself a spectacle, his voice booming from every side. “You see your Emperor’s justice! Swift and certain . . . and fair!”

His future lay dead at his feet, and there he was . . . playacting.

Almost I pitied him.

Almost.

He leveled his sword at me, its point cubits from my chest. But he had learned his lesson, seemingly, and did not press his advance. “You killed my father,” he said. “You destroyed Gododdin. My fleet. My men. You took my sister, brought her to shame.”

“That’s enough!” Selene exclaimed, pushing past me. “Uncle Nicky is dead! Stop this, Alex! Just *stop*!”

“Shut your gape, sister!” Alexander said, turning his point on Selene. “You embarrass yourself!”

I caught Selene by the wrist, so checked her advance. She looked at me, long hair floating in the constant wind, eyes red and wild. Her father was dead. Her uncle lay dead at her feet. Murdered. Her life—the life she had waited her whole life to begin—was ended before it could start. The look in her eyes . . . the fury, the anguish, and the pain . . . I cannot describe them.

“Let her go, dog!” Alexander snarled. “You’ve lost!”

“She’s nothing to do with this,” I said, and held her gaze with mine. Softly then, I smiled, and released her. “Your quarrel is with me, O Prince.”

Alexander’s face flushed, sword *thrummed* in the air as he brandished it. “*Prince!*” he spat the word like a curse. “I am mankind, Marlowe! The Firstborn Son of Earth!”

“You are the last,” I said, looking upon the face of doomed Nicephorus. The shot had entered just above the eunuch’s left eye. A third eye: forever weeping, forever open. I took a step toward him, moving Selene behind. I knew my days were numbered, suspected that even my seconds were, and so I swept my gaze over the crowd, over the clergy looming like a chessboard, a tessellated sea of black and white.

“You are the last!” I said again, and raised my voice.

The false king laughed, looked to his priests—his masters. Lifting his sword in a kind of shrug, he said, “What is this, old man? Prophecy?”

“If you like,” I said. “Though you slay me, my shade will haunt your every waking breath. You will never escape my shadow—”

Alexander’s blade flashed a hand’s span from my throat. “It is you who will not escape,” said he. “My father’s rings. Give them to me.”

I smiled, looked down at the blade inches from my breast. “You’ve forgotten the old tales,” I said, and reaching up, I wrapped my right hand around the point of the sword and squeezed. The highmatter gave slightly beneath my fingers. It felt more like flesh and blood than true steel, soft, with a core inflexible. There was no pain, no blood, no hurt upon my flesh. “No blade can cut the devil down.”

Fear stretched the princeling’s eyes, and he yanked his sword from my grasp. He staggered back, but that absurd cloak of his checked his retreat, and he stumbled, fell. The Grass Crown fell from his head, rolled on the stone.

All was deathly silent.

I stood, and smiled, and did not laugh.

Selene, to her credit, crossed to her brother’s side.

“Get away from me, whore!” Alexander snarled, and tore the cloak from his shoulders. He spat at her, utterly transformed.

Selene recoiled.

I counted the weapons aimed at me, lost track at half a hundred.

“You will be the last Emperor,” I said. “The galaxy will wither in your hand. You yourself will be hollowed out, an empty shell for other men to fill, and when you are finished—”

“Shoot him!” Alexander roared, rounding on Keriot and the Sentinels, his blade afire. “He tries a spell!”

But Captain Keriot did not fire. No one did.

“Exalted Radiance!” came a cool, sneering voice from the steps above. “We agreed Lord Marlowe would be executed.”

A drop of ice landed in my heart’s pool, turned all the blood in me to crystal.

I knew that voice, had thought never to know it again.

As I turned my face to the stair, I saw Selene’s brows contract. She had recognized it, too. A figure had appeared on the rise beside the Prince-Prior—the one Nicephorus had called Lord Theudas—a man hairless, sallow, robed in black, his face powdered, his lips and eyes darkly painted. He

smiled, and as he smiled his brow contracted, wrinkling the runemark tattooed in its center.

Seeing him, I knew that I had guessed rightly, and felt my stomach turn.

William's words—his warning, inscribed in the note Edouard had given me the day we met—echoed in the recesses of my mind.

Demoniacs all.

He must have known.

Yod's smile widened, to see the surprise on my face. I had seen him die, watched as Ramanthanu dragged him down, witnessed Cassandra's sword pierce his face.

He was dead . . . yet he lived.

So this was how it felt . . .

"You."

"Yes," said he, "*me*."

Alexander's blade was still kindled. "He must die!"

"He will die, dear boy," the Cantor said—that secret master of empire. "But his death has value. He will be beheaded, as befits a monster of his enormity."

The man who would be king snarled, half a beast. "Beheading is too good for him!" he said, and pointed his weapon once more at me. "Let him be hanged."

Yod bowed his head, a note of mocking there unnoticed by the little prince. "All shall be as my Emperor wills it."

"Alex . . ." Selene reached out a hand. Her face was white as Death.

Cold venom flashed in the prince's eyes. "Don't call me that," he said, and killed his blade. "I am *the Emperor*. The throne is mine. Father chose *me*." He stooped, and collected the Grass Crown from the bloodied stones where it had fallen. He did not place it back upon his head, but held it in his fist. "The war is *not* over. Your Lord Marlowe has achieved *nothing*. The . . ." He hesitated, mindful of the truth, of his priestly masters. "The Cielcin remain. Scattered, yes, but dangerous. It falls to me to hunt them down. I will bring peace to the galaxy, to the Empire."

"The war *is* over," Selene said. "The Scourge of Earth is dead. Without

its leadership, the Cielcin will fall back into the night.”

“You’ve lost your mind as well as your virtue!” Alexander sneered. “Orestes! Chlorus! Take her away!”

Two of the Excubitors broke ranks, their shining faces meaningless, their white cloaks floating on the breeze. “Don’t you dare!” Selene said, retreating.

Alexander turned his back and mounted the stairs, deaf to her pleading.

“Stop!” The voice that tore through the plaza was mine.

Sir Orestes and Sir Chlorus halted at my command.

Alexander looked down, fury plain on his face.

Who but the Emperor could command the Knights Excubitor?

The inhuman soldiers were bred—programmed—to perfect obedience. To obey the Imperial House, and most especially the person of the Emperor. Me.

The crowd seemed to realize this, shock manifesting as whispers, a murmur—of countless wings fluttering—a disturbance on the air. Alexander had seen me command the Excubitors aboard *Aurora*, had failed to dispose of them, so that ever after rumor of that mistake might haunt his reign.

“I will give you your father’s rings,” I said, and removed the golden signet from my right thumb. I held it up for his examination. “Only let my people go.”

“You are in no position to argue!” Alexander sneered. “If you have truly destroyed the ship, you have nothing of value.”

“On the contrary,” I said. “I have myself.”

Alexander still clutched the crown in one hand, his unkindled blade in the other. “We have you already.”

“Everything I know,” I said. “About my abilities. About the Watchers. About the Hidden One!” From the way the prince twitched, I knew he knew of what I spoke. “Let your sister go, and Neema here, and swear to me you will let my people be!”

“Exalted Radiance!” Yod said, voice suddenly sharp. “We have heard

enough of this madman's ranting. Let us put an end to this!" Was he afraid? I looked up into the sorcerer's painted, powdered face.

He should fear me.

But Alexander raised a hand to silence him, rounded once more on me. "Give me the rings, old man."

"I have your word, then?"

"You will have nothing from me!" he said. "You will give me the rings, or you and my *whore* of a sister will die here and now. Do you understand?"

I understood perfectly. They could not be sure of killing me—could not even be sure that death would destroy me—and so they targeted the only part of me they could: my companions.

My wife.

Only the wind moved, lifted my antique cloak. Selene's hair. The white banners.

The bars of the cage that hemmed me in were not gold, but crude iron. Not the prison of the throne, but a prison all the same. All my choice was frittered away. Save one. I could run, escape to the space beyond time, but I knew that to do so would be to set the hounds after me. Alexander's Great Hunt had yet to begin—though he had spoken of its genesis mere moments before—but had I run then and there, it would have had a wholly different object.

And I could not have taken Selene with me, or poor Neema.

No, I had known from the moment we arrived in Tenba system—had suspected even before that—that I had come to Meridian to die.

And so I took the only step that was left to me.

I tossed the signet on the lion skin at the base of the stair. Removing the next, I said, "All I am dies with me."

"Of that," said Yod, "I would not be so certain, gentle lord."

More than anyone present, I knew what that creature was capable of—what the Chantry was capable of. They must have the means to read memories, even after death. Brethren was capable of such wonders, and they had the control of Earth. Everything the ancient Americans had left behind.

“What a man *is*,” I said, “cannot be taken.” I held the Cantor’s gaze. “You have had my blood for centuries. What has it given you?”

Yod said nothing.

I flung the second ring to the earth. It *pinged* on the black stone, rolled aside. One of the Martians rushed to retrieve it. I tossed the third to one side. The whole thing had become a farce, a mockery of power.

“Take them!” Alexander said, when I’d cast my fifth and final ring to the earth. Men of the Martian Guard approached us. The Excubitors stood rooted where I had left them. Selene yowled as men seized her, bruising her white limbs with their gauntleted hands.

Rough hands closed on my arms, and I felt the black cloak torn from my shoulders. I do not know how I knew the man who’d seized me intended to take my life, but I knew it with utter certainty. Something in his posture, perhaps, in the rigidity of the arm that wielded the knife.

“No!”

A small, soft shape collided with me and my assassin, and before I knew it, I was on the ground, wrestling an armored Martian. His face was near my own—a broad, flat plane of scarred skin and dull eyes. My hands held his wrist, kept the point of his poniard from my guts. I could feel the servos in his suit’s exoskeleton whining, but I had the position, the leverage. I let him move, twisted to pin him under me. His armor snagged on the flagstones, and I slammed his own point up under his chin into the brain. I stood, drew out the knife. Its blade wept red blood upon the stone. Turning, I saw the shape that had saved my life.

It was Neema.

The Nemrutti servant lay on his back, still breathing, one hand pressed to the ragged wound in his neck. The blade that had killed him—the blade I held—was a thing of crude metal. It had left a fearsome wound.

As I went to him, Neema’s eyes turned to glass, and I rounded on the others. Chaos erupted around me. Shots rang out, men lay dead. Sentinels. Martians. Excubitors. Women were screaming, and the throng beyond the blocked soldiery was running from the square in terror, men and women trampling one another in their haste to be away.

The attempt on my life had activated the remaining Knights Excubitor—those Alexander had brought himself. They had turned on the Sentinels, turned on the Martians, cut both to ribbons with their blazing swords. Already half their number lay dead, lay bleeding on the steps. Lord Theudas retreated up the stairs, joined Yod and Alexander behind a wall of Sentinels in black. Lesser courtiers cowered or cried.

“Hadrian!” Selene ran to me. I made her stand behind.

More men of the Martian Guard turned to face me. I counted six in all. They held lances, stunners, swords. Scarce-armed as I was, unshielded, I might have slain so many. But there were hundreds of soldiers in the square. Could I seize a shield generator? Find a sword for myself?

No chance.

Neema was dead, and Lord Nicephorus—and the Empire with it.

I shut my eyes, weighed the dagger in my hand.

I might have slain the princeling then, hurled the knife at him with all my strength, chosen to strike true. But to do so would be the death of Selene, and Alexander was only a pawn—no true Emperor.

So I raised the knife in defiance. “Excubitors!” I roared. “I command you! Kneel!”

The mirror knights knelt at once—some of them mid-swing.

“You see?” I said into the sudden stillness, raising my chin. But they already knew. Alexander knew, had known the truth from the moment he accosted me outside the royal apartments. He only wished that it were otherwise, and had the strength to force his wish on the world. Knife still upraised, I said, “You will remember this moment, all the days of your life.”

With that, I cast the knife aside, as I had cast aside every other thing.

The Martians closed in seconds, and my arms were pinned at my sides.

I permitted myself to be led away. I looked back at poor Neema, my faithful servant. Neema, who had given his life for mine. But the Martian at my left seized my face and turned my head away.

“Hadrian!” The men that held Selene lifted her bodily into the air. They were taking her in a different direction. She struggled against them, legs working against the wind as they dragged her away.

I knew I would never see her again. “Selene!” I cried, watching her thrown over the shoulder of one Martian as though she were a sack of grain. “Selene!”

“Hadrian!” She reached toward me. Not far. Too far away.

There was nothing I could do.

With the gifts the Absolute had given me, the only person I could save was myself.

“I’m sorry!”

I should have left her with Cassandra. With the others.

But she had insisted, and there had been good reason to keep her by my side.

“I love you!”

Had I spoken the words? Or heard them spoken? I cannot remember. Can remember either way. A blow caught me in the back of the head, and I fell into a dream of darkness like the end of time.

I can still see her, even now, her hand reaching out for mine.

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CHAPTER 90

THE PANEGRIST

I LOOKED FOR HER, later. But by the time I won free, her trail was cold, and though I quested for her across the ocean of stars, I did not find her. I know now that I shall never find her, as I will never find Valka. Not in this life. Her fate is shrouded, confused—the stuff of rumor, of legend, and romance. Some say she was sold to one of Alexander’s generals, others that she was retired to Shakespeare—to her mother’s house, where she met her fate in the Night of Knives. Still more say she became an ash maiden, one of the nuns that keeps the God Emperor’s grave on Avalon—others that she languishes on Belusha, or in some other secret place, forever slumbering inside a crystal coffin.

But I know the truth: that she is dead. That my return to the realms of men has come too late. She was taken: first to Avalon, thence to Earth, whence she will never come again.

I am old, so old that I can now scarce comprehend the years and centuries I embrace. I do not look it. The gift I have received—the body the Absolute has given me—is a foretaste and promise of the universe to come. Though I wear the face of a man in his prime, my mind and soul are ancient as empires. I am weary, but I journey on. I fear now that I shall never die, that it is my duty, my blessing, my curse to battle on, to dwell amid these dying stars from this day until the end of days: a witness to the wonders I have seen.

To the great will and wisdom I have served.

But I wanted to die. There, then, in that cell of the Tower of Morne. I prayed for the death Prytanis’s oracle had promised me, yearned for it—and for sleep, and dream, and peacefulness. I was so tired then, so sad, and so alone. I found myself reliving that walk across the surface on Dharan-Tun,

the shades of my fallen all with me, and Pallino's gruff voice roaring *The Prince of Man has come!* How I wish I might have gone with them, off on their adventure . . .

Another time.

My dead so outnumber my living—as becomes true of all who live so long. Life is a series of partings, so the wise all say. But the wisdom of men is foolishness to the one who made him, and I have seen the reunion that is to come.

As Cassandra met her mother in the Dark that awaits, I know that I will see them all again. Valka. Selene. Lorian. Pallino. Corvo and Durand. Ilex and Crim. Elara and Siran. And Ghen. And Switch. William the Great will live anew, and music will flow from him—as from all things.

How I yearned for it, prayed for it.

For death.

I pray for it, still.

But I have not received it. Maybe I never will.

Not until all is counted. Not until all is ended.

And there are endings, Reader—many endings—still to come. Yours, mine . . . all.

And yet nothing is truly ended, not until all is done.

The Watchers remain. And the Sons of Earth. A serpent sits the Solar Throne, crowned in living gold. The galaxy rots, as I foretold. The Commonwealth is burning. The Jaddians have burned it. And now the Empire cracks and sags with age, and Time—Ever-Fleeting—runs forward .

..

. . . down.

To darkness? Or new light?

. . .

My cell was black metal and stone. A bed. A basin. A toilet service.

I sat alone and dreamed.

I could not hear his music, but I knew that it was there. I was a part of it. Everything is, whether lovely, or malign. Have I said that we are all stories? We are all *his* story. That is why we suffer. Because he suffers . . . in his labor over us, for love of us. Our suffering makes us like him, brings him nearer, and us . . .

Far off then, I felt the eyes of gods, and bending my will upon eternity, I knew the light of my star would one day reach them, and call men to their attentions. The torch was lit, the bell rung. I felt like a child peering over the edge of a cliff, seeing the host of his nation's enemy marching by—or a pride of starving lions on the prowl. Lions, or leopards, or wolves. I dared not look too long, or too wantonly, lest the wind change, and carry my scent to the farther suns. I saw far counties, nations, empires fat with time and conquest, ruled by races savage and strange. We are not alone, have never been alone—that is the great lie the Chantry long has taught us. The face of one like fire turned toward me, and I ducked my head, back into ordinary space.

Did I dare disturb the universe?

I already had, had already done *his* will.

Was I truly man's salvation? Or had I—like that nameless Sentinel—fired a shot that broke the world? The Absolute had called on me to judge the Pale Cielcin. Was I the instrument of man's undoing, too?

My door opened, and I turned, expecting the cathars and the carnifex.

An old soldier crossed the threshold instead, an old man leaning on a staff, a pilgrim in gray. He was alone, and when the door closed, he bowed to me, and said, "You are to be hanged in the morning."

"I know," I said.

"They have stripped me of my rank."

"I know that, too." I looked at him, and smiled. "And I am sorry. Our victories net ashes, Bassander Lin."

"I bribed the guards to let me see you," he said. "My reputation is still worth that much."

I looked at his boots, feeling in that moment that I could not have borne

to see whatever it was lay in his aged and craggy face. “Did the Jaddians escape?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I said. There was some hope there of peace, of detente at the very least.

Bassander tapped his cane on the smooth stone floor. At last he looked me square in the face, eyes sharp and shining. “I’ve come to take you out of here.”

I smiled up at him, held his gaze a long moment. “You can’t.”

Bassander tapped his cane on the stone floor, clearly agitated. “I have a ship waiting.” He looked up at the camera. Was it active? It must be. No bribe could be worth the life of the security guard to himself, surely. He would take the money to terminate the recording and renege.

“Then you should take it,” I said, still shaken by the vision of fire I had seen, the Watcher that had glimpsed me from afar. “I cannot go with you.”

“You must!” he said. “You are the Emperor! God’s chosen lord!”

“Chosen for what, Bassander? And by whom? Tell me that!” I glared at him, eyes wide, jaw set. “Do you even know what *god* you believe in anymore?”

“I believe in *you*, lord,” he said, and did not call me *Emperor*. “In your god. You ended the war! You destroyed the Cielcin and those . . . those *things*.”

My hair hung down between us, a curtain like the curtain of night. I was seated on the edge of the bed, facing the sink and toilet service, at an angle to the door. “I did,” I said, not looking at him. “And I have destroyed the Empire.”

Lin did not respond to that. He came to stand in front of me. I could feel his eyes—like the eyes of the Watchers—boring through the roof of my skull. “I saw you,” he said, and his voice shook. “Upon *Demiurge*. All those years ago. I saw you die.”

“You did.”

“You died a second time,” he said. “You can’t deny it.”

I did look up then—for just a moment. The man who had been the

Phoenix, the Hero of Perflugium, wore a long, gray coat over his shoulders, the sleeves too long, too wide. He wore dull fatigues beneath, without device or ornament, without weapon or shield-belt. His boots alone remained of the high officer he had been. And his cane.

"I don't deny it," I said.

"Then why won't you come with me now?"

The fiery face of the Watcher I had seen seared my mind. "Because if I go, they'll hunt me," I said. "Me . . . and Cassandra. And—"

He knew all of it already, had been upon *Demiurge* often in those final days.

"It will all fail without you," said he, coming dangerous-close.

I glared at him. "You must go, Bassander. If you stay . . . if they hear what you are saying, they will kill you, too."

A choked sound escaped the old soldier then, and looking up I saw his eyes were closed. His shoulders shook, stilled, and I realized he was fighting grief. "Caesar," he said, staking his allegiance, sealing his fate, "forgive me. I should have foreseen this. Had we but gone somewhere else—anywhere else, I—"

"Bassander!" I hissed, stunning the man to silence. "This is where I'm meant to be. That is why you cannot save me now."

"But I handed you over *to* them!" he said, voice filled with bitterness.

"Because I told you to," I said, and softened my voice. "I am where I *must* be."

"But you cannot die," said he.

"Is that what you believe?"

The older man—who was in truth already much younger than I—reached into a pocket of his robe. "I took this," he said, "from the master of the keys." He produced a cylinder of ivory and bright metal, a curving handle with a knuckle guard of adamant and iridium, its pommel graven in the likeness of that *other* phoenix, the simurgh of Jadd. He offered it to me.

I reached for it, imagining that I might slay Alexander with it, and so protect my kin. Or that I might save Selene, and carry her off in truth.

"Keep it." I let my hand fall. Such thoughts were foolishness. Pride. "I

do not need it.”

Lin stood so still one might be forgiven for thinking there were marble in him, not bone. “You really mean to die.” His face was ashen, his eyes alight with unfallen tears.

“My task was to save mankind,” I said, holding his gaze. “I have saved her, Bassander. From the Cielcin and their gods. But I cannot save her from herself.”

“The only way to do that,” Lin said, “is one man at a time.”

There was wisdom.

“Where will you go?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, and cast his eyes at the roof above our heads. “My whole life, I have been a soldier. My parents were soldiers. I was born in the fleet, in the middle of nowhere . . .” He smiled, and there was a deep sorrow in his face. “I have nowhere to go.”

I knew *precisely* how he felt, though I’d been born in a palace, and was no soldier’s whelp. I could never go home, had no home to go to. I never had . . .

I turned my face to the black metal of the door, spared a glance for the cameras. “Will you do me one favor, old friend?”

“Anything, lord.” He knelt then—groaning—and seized my wrist. “You have only to order it.”

I smiled, and felt every instant of my near-seven centuries of life in that moment. I was so old then, who seems so young to me, now. “Do you know Colchis?”

“Colchis, lord?” he looked at me. “The planet?”

“It’s a moon,” I corrected him, unable to help myself. “Of the Atlas system. In the Upper Sagittarius. Do you know it?”

The once-strategos shook his head, released my wrist. “Only by reputation—only a little. There’s a library there . . . ?”

“There is,” I said. “There’s an island. In the south. Thessa. I dwelt there with . . . with Valka. After my ordeal with the Cielcin . . .” I squeezed the last two fingers of my right hand, the fingers that Dorayaica once had taken from me. “There’s a grave there. On the cliffs overlooking the sea . . . I

hope it is still there, I . . .” Had Imrah and her people continued to tend the graves on that isle of the dead? “Would you bury my sword by it? I . . . that is where it belongs.”

I did not tell him whose grave it was, or whose sword.

The old soldier rocked back on his knees, his face transfigured—a true pilgrim at last. “Yes, my lord. I will, my lord.” He touched the pocket of his gray coat where he had secreted his stolen blade. “It would be my honor.”

“Tell no one you’ve done it,” I said. “It will be taken if you do, and shut up as a relic.”

“I understand,” Lin said, and bowed his head. “Bless me, lord.”

“Bless you?” I echoed, mystified. “I am no priest.”

He looked back at me then, and his eyes were shining. “Please.”

I shifted forward where I sat, laid one hand upon the soldier’s crown.

What could I say?

My mind was blank. Silent. I opened my mouth. Words came out. “Seek hardship, Bassander Lin, and do only what *must* be.”

I took my hand away, withdrawing as one burned. They were Brethren’s words. Brethren’s words . . . and *his*. Still, I felt I should say more. I stared at the man—stared *through* him, into darkness. The words came. The true blessing. “May your struggle ease your pain.”

He shut his eyes, bowed his head. Not to his Emperor.

To something else.

“Thank you,” he said. The tears were shining on his face. Still kneeling—our faces almost level—he wiped them on his sleeve. “Will you not come?”

I shook my head. “This is where I’m meant to be.”

“But we need you!” he pleaded. “The *Empress* needs you. Your daughter —”

The taste of iron filled my mouth. There was a grain of truth! “My daughter needs me *here*,” I said. *But Selene . . .*

I knew what fate awaited Selene. One fate . . .

But no . . . that had only been another of Ushara’s lies.

“But you saved the galaxy!” he pleaded. “You could be a second God

Emperor!”

“No!” I almost shouted. “No, Bassander. I couldn’t be. There was no God Emperor. He was a man—just as I.”

“And so you cede the throne to a puppet?” he hissed, knowing those words might cost his life. “To that *boy*?”

I smiled sadly at him, pressed my lips together. “The throne is nothing,” I said. “To me. And to the one that sent me.”

“You really will not come with me . . .” he said, disbelieving.

“This is where I’m meant to be.”

We both were silent then, two men in a cage of metal and stone. A pocket universe. I studied my hands—whole and unblemished, untouched by the false king’s blade. “Two deaths I’ve given this cause already. What is a third?” I shut my eyes. “May it be the last.”

He left me then, though I would see him the next day—if day it could be called on that sun-stopped planet. One face in the crowd. Bassander Lin. My last friend, my enemy. Hero of the rout at Perfugium, veteran of a hundred bloody battles. Of Berenike. Of Danu. Of Gododdin . . . He has carried word of my deeds to countless stars, kindled not the firestorm, but a fire in my name.

I have seen his followers—*my* followers—on many worlds since my return.

Ripe fruit for my daughter.

For the war and harvest that is to come.

CHAPTER 91

THE ASCENT OF ALEXANDER

THE WIND ROSE ALL around me, carrying with it a great many things: The scent of rain. Of rot. Of sodden men. Their voices. Their whispers. Their words and cries. The clangor of drums filled the plaza, resounded off the bare, black columns, mingled with the shout of silver trumpets. I could taste the metallic tang of plasma on the air, the electrical reek of energy weapons sizzling in the damp. The sky above threatened lightning, but the rain that fell was gentle—warm and sweet—a thing blown from Tenba’s dayside, carried by the wind into night . . .

. . . as I soon would be.

Eyes shut, I let the wind and noise wash over me—maybe for the last time.

My hands were bound, my feet bare.

They had taken my boots, my belt, my sash, and cloak—had left me with naught but my tunic and trousers. It was humiliation for a soldier to stand thus: unshod, unbelted. But I was not a soldier. I was the Emperor of All Mankind—though my killers denied it—and I stood calm and straight in the shadows . . . waiting.

I had died twice before. Death held no more terror for me.

“Murderer!” The word rose above the noise of the crowd outside, frayed and wild.

“Destroyer!”

“Demoniac!”

“Traitor and usurper! Damn you!” A woman’s voice, shrill and piercing.
“Damn you!”

“Abomination!”

“He killed the Emperor!”

How many had come out to see my end? Those people of Tenba? Those fools whom I had saved? How many *thousands*?

I had saved them. Every one.

How easy it would have been to curse them then. To hate them. To spit blood and venom from the scaffold. But they did not know what they were saying. They did not know the truth. Those poor people . . . they were not the masters of their own lives, had hardly the command of their own wills. Alexander had led them—or his masters had led them—and they had followed. That was all. Standing there, listening, I knew the story told by my enemies would spread like a cancer on the stars—a second plague. I could not stop it. I never could. It had been hubris to try, to think that we might—with Jaddian aid and Lin’s battered legions—take the galaxy in my name.

Let them have it.

I felt the Serpent’s presence then, as a static charge in the air. The men of the Martian Guard that bracketed me on either side stood a little straighter, stock-still, and at once the noise of the rain and the crowd outside grew somehow farther away, as though their tide were dimmed.

“Mars,” whispered the man at my left hand, and again, emphatically. “Mars is in transit.”

I opened my eyes at last, and saw him, moving from the side door opposite the place where I stood in the rain—droplets *pinging* on the helms and armored shoulders of the scarlet Corinthians that stood about me. The gestatory throne awaited the Emperor, set beneath the portico that stood before the doors of the palace of government, ready to be carried out and forward to the place before the stair.

He wore his armor, white and gold, and all-white now was the cape upon his shoulders, though still his lion skin embraced him. His long red hair had been oiled back, held in place by the gilt laurels of the Grass Crown. Eying me across the portico, he smiled, and his smile did not reach his eyes.

Yod followed him—a living shadow—and a cloud of black-robed priests, white-crowned, were ever in his train. Alexander dismissed them

with a gesture, and they remained in the shadow of the door, save Yod alone, who followed his puppet Emperor out into the light and gentle rain.

“Present arms!”

The Martians about me all turned to steel, became as statues.

Alexander advanced to within half a dozen paces, stood just under the edge of the portico. He did not speak for a moment, but studied me, his eyes crawling over my face, my soaking hair. His smile widened. “Look at you,” he said, exhaling, eyes alight. “You look a mess.”

I said nothing. There was nothing more to say.

“Why so quiet?” Alexander asked, turning his head. “Speak. It is your last chance. Nothing you can say can change what must be done.” When still I did not speak, he glanced to Yod before taking a careful step nearer.

He still felt fear.

Soft rain drummed against his armor, slid from his cape, his oiled hair as he approached. “Nothing?” He cocked his head, ear turned toward me. “No? Have you really nothing to say? No parting shot? No final lesson?”

“I was a poor teacher,” I said at last.

His eyes were flame. “I worshipped you, you know,” he said, words brittle. “I know better now.” He looked to Yod. “There are no gods . . . but those we make for ourselves.”

“You should know better than that by now,” I said.

“*There* he is.” Alexander thrust a finger in my face, shook it. “The *preacher*. Tell me this, Preacher: Will you come back again?”

I smiled at him, blinking back the rain like tears. “I set out to save humanity,” I said, the same words I had said to the boy’s father at the last. “And I have saved them, but not from you.”

The prince—the Emperor—struck me across the face, a blow to turn my cheek.

It took me a moment to master myself, to regain my composure. I shook my head, and I turned my face to the false king, just as Edouard had done to me.

Alexander withdrew and snorted his derision.

“My fight was with the Cielcin,” I said. “That fight is over. It is

finished.”

It is finished.

The false king glared at me, eyes twin chips of glass green as poison. Hardly in control of himself, he advanced upon me, smiling with all his venom. He bent down, so that his face was inches from mine, and whispered into my ear. “I will kill you a *thousand* times if I have to. As many times as it takes. There will be nowhere in *my galaxy* for you to hide.” He straightened, and his smile had faded, but his eyes shone more brightly with every word. “I’ve beaten you.”

I turned my face to Yod, that shadow lord. “Don’t you mean *we*?”

Yod’s face was unreadable, but a welter of fury and contempt purpled the Imperial visage. He struck me a second time, drew close again as his Martians held me steady. “I *am* the Emperor,” Alexander sneered. “You are nothing now. Only a monster to be destroyed.”

It was my turn to smile, and for a moment—I think—it was the old, crooked smile. “You’ll never be rid of me,” I said, “even if I do truly die this day. You’ll fear my ghost in every shadow, every whisper. I will be with you, Alexander—all the days of your life.”

The Emperor, that great serpent, blinked, recoiled. “You old fool,” he said.

“We waste time here, Exalted Radiance,” said Yod, looking me over as though he were the client in a bordello. “Preparations are complete. We have a schedule to keep.”

Alexander looked around, seemed to notice his shadow—his handler—for the first time. “Yes, of course,” said he, and looked from Yod to myself and back again, almost furtively. “Very good.”

Yod made a sign, and a Martian officer approached through the rain, offered salute. “Mighty Mars!” he said, “Your people await you.”

“Thank you, Captain Nero,” said the false Emperor, and turned as if to go. Before he had gone two steps he halted, one hand on his hip. “I almost forgot,” he said, and whirled, rounding on me. I saw the flash of ceramic in his fist.

I gasped as the knife took me, plunged into my side just beneath the ribs

—just where Dorayaica’s blade had taken me on Danu. “There,” he said, free hand on the back of my neck, face scarce inches from my own, eyes intent. “Now it’s finished.” He straightened, drew out the knife. “I’ve beaten you . . .”

He had to say the words again, had to hold the knife to see my blood for himself.

To reassure himself.

“Time . . .” I hissed through pain, “will tell, dear boy.”

Alexander’s nostrils flared.

“Radiance!” Yod injected. “Enough! We need him alive a little longer!”

Already I could feel my body going into shock, could feel the blood running hot out to mingle with the cool rain. But I had life in me yet. Minutes at least.

Enough.

Somewhere in the square below, the band began to play. I recognized the Imperial anthem. Alexander left me there, left me bleeding, and took his throne. As I sagged there in the arms of my captors, I watched him taken up by his countless androgyns, borne aloft.

There is . . . an old story . . . Tor Gibson’s voice echoed in my ears. “Some say it is about the God Emperor; others that it is a tale of Victoria. Still more say it is of Arthur, or the Great Alexander . . .”

Say it is Alexander . . . I thought, my own voice melding with his own.

“Desiring knowledge of all things, he returned to Babylon, having taken the Hydaspes and conquered the men of Jhelum, and there ordered that Nimrod’s Tower should be rebuilt, that he might conquer heaven itself and take the daughters of God for his harem. But his efforts were in vain, for the curse that lay on Babylon of old remained, that no man might take the path of Enoch ever again. Three times he commanded his armies to build for him that Tower, and three times it fell.

“Then Orodes the Wise came to him out of Persia, and prostrated himself before the King of Kings. At his direction then was built a winged chariot, and gryphons there were taken from the heights of Mount Dena, and yoked to it, that the Lord of the World might ride to heaven in peace,

and break bread with the Lord of All and so make one of his daughters his bride.

“In time, Alexander departed, taking wing, rising higher and higher until all the world unrolled beneath him, and he saw unto the Four Kings seated at its four corners, and beholding the all of it, he knew fear for the first time, and heard a voice like thunder saying, ‘Go back, Lord of Men, go back, for thy kingdom is on Earth, not over it.’”

Go back, I thought, watching the chair go forward, *down* those slick, black steps. *Go back*.

But time does not turn back, save in memory.

For this Alexander, there was no going back.

I did not hear his speech, his sentence. I was not conscious of the moment the music ceased. Already my mind was blank, not black, not red, but pale gray. I was aware—as one on laudanum—of the world as through a mist, a fog of pain and loss of feeling. The rain was warm, and gentle, and brought with each drop a measure of peace.

Of calm. Of quiet.

Step—drag—foot—step.

I remember . . . I remember the men of the Martian Guard about me, and a double cordon of them in the square below as I was brought down, half dragged and half carried, my bare feet scuffing stone. There were banners—tall things like pillars of cloud—standing about the plaza, red suns shining on them each. Each a supergiant, ready to collapse.

The men on the platform wore black—a hue little different from my own.

Step—step—drag—step.

Metal beneath my feet. Wet footfalls. Ringing steel.

The scaffold. Ten thousand faces leering. A hundred thousand. More. Half the city had come to see the Halfmortal made mortal at last. The robes of the cathars stood upon the platform fluttered in the air, seemed to me like the wings of birds. Of ravens. Their eyes were lost beneath muslin bands. There was the carnifex—my executioner—standing there hooded and cloaked, his vestments like the night, his face veiled entire. He’d been there

since midnight, in keeping with holy writ, his White Sword unsheathed . . . but he would not have the chance to use it. Beheading was a punishment reserved for the palatinate, for lords of high birth and bearing.

I had been denied that privilege.

I would be hanged like a common criminal.

That was just as well. I had lost my head before, had no desire to lose my head again.

It was a blessing, really. Not to so suffer twice.

My eyes closed, it was possible to imagine that I stood once more in the arena—as, in a sense, I did. But the ground beneath my feet was hollow steel, not stone, and the air had never been so cool on Emesh, where the very rain steamed as it smote the earth.

Something struck the scaffold at my feet, and I opened my eyes.

The Emperor's men held the crowd in abeyance, a wall against the sea. The square about the plinth and that statue of that half-forgotten Emperor was filled with rank humanity, the species I had bent my life to save. An ocean of faces, each a cell in the Body of Man, moved as if a protoplasm—a single living thing.

I shivered. Had I lost that much blood already?

A gray old man stood in the shadow of the colonnade, had clambered up onto the wall that divided the gallery behind the colonnade from the broader plaza, so that he stood head and shoulders above the rest.

It was Bassander Lin.

Our eyes met. His face half turned away.

“For the crime of high treason! For regicide—the murder of my father! For the massacre of the people of Gododdin! For the destruction of the Imperial fleet—” Alexander's words turned to static in my ears.

To a dull roaring. A hiss.

But I know what he must have said: “I, Alexander the Sixth of the House Aventine, Emperor of All Mankind, do sentence you to die!”

The Jaddians had fled. Kaim-Olorin had taken his people and his ships away the moment I'd made Bassander hand me over to Alexander's men.

Would they make peace with the Imperium? Apologize for the incident on *Aurora*? Or was war to start afresh?

Of course, war had never ended. The Lothrians were burning Jadd that very moment, lighting whole worlds ablaze. I prayed the *Darklight* weapon I had given Olorin would be enough to turn the tide, but if it was not, the Jaddians would soon come between the hammer and the anvil.

But what would come would come, and those who remained would face it as they could. My part in the story was done, my victory achieved.

My death was no victory for the would-be Emperor, only the appearance of one.

The Empire would die with me, though it took a thousand years more to fall.

The Absolute would give me justice, for there is no justice from the hands of men.

As they fitted the noose about my neck, I looked up into the sky. It was half dark, and more than half disturbed by cloud, so that only the mightiest of the suns peered through in witness, in mute testament to the vastness of *his* creation—of which I was but one small part. A crucial part, like every part. Before long—as the Watchers reckoned time—one of those little lights, doubtless one I could not then see, would blossom, flower, and fill the sky with fire. Tenba would survive—we were not so near Gododdin as that—but in a hundred years that mob, or its descendants, would look upon my star in wonder and in terror both . . . to know that once, just once, a man strove with the very gods that built the universe . . . and won.

At once a peace filled my chest like wine, and I heard it then . . . one final time.

A single note, as a bell at the close of day: clear and sweet and sudden.

It was enough.

In that final moment, I recalled the message Prytanis and Lorian had given me—that little roll of paper—and the words thinly inked upon it.

Marlowe! Marlowe! It had said, the first spike. *Where were you when—*

Here, I answered then and silently, knowing he could hear me. *Right here.*

Somewhere—it seemed to me a million light-years away—a man in black raised his sword. Another pulled a lever.

The earth fell away beneath my feet, and wings immortal took my weight. The line—that spider’s thread—went taut. They had wanted me to suffer, the spinners of that thread, had wanted me to choke and purple and gasp. But the Absolute—in his mercy, his kindness, his tender care—broke my neck at once.

• • •

There are endings, Reader, and this is one. The end, the place where we began our journey—you and I—with Hadrian Marlowe hanged for all the worlds to see. For that is the story you were told, the story you have been told all the days of your life.

But it was not the end.

There are no endings, Reader. Not in truth. One story fades, another begins—or else crashes one into the next with a noise like thunder. As day and night are themselves illusions of perspective caused by the turning of worlds, so too are beginnings and endings little more than a trick of ink and paper . . . of which I have used, perhaps, too much.

I shall speak no word of where I went thereafter, of where I returned from beyond the darkness that awaits—or when, or how. It does not matter, not to you. With this record—these pages—I leave now the last measure of myself.

My full account.

My part of the greater story—the greatest. *His*.

I will write no further, Reader, and pray you understand.

I shall go on alone.

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THE LIFE OF HADRIAN MARLOWE

A TIMELINE

WHAT FOLLOWS IS AN abridged record of the life of Hadrian Marlowe, from his birth on ISD 16117.09.29 through to conclusion of this volume. This timeline is not entirely comprehensive. Whole volumes of Lord Marlowe's account appear to be lost—or else were left out of this iteration of his memoir. The accounts of most of his major battles are missing. No account of the Battle of Senuessa, for instance, has ever been found. It is possible that there may be entire chapters of his life lost in the gaps between those periods attested to clearly in the text. Certain episodes enumerated below do not appear in the seven primary volumes (the last of which I am presently translating), but do appear in various *apocryphon* (such as the *Nagramman Fragment*, alternately called “Knowledge,” believed to be a fragment surviving from an earlier draft of *The Sun Eater*). These fragments are labelled here with their appropriate titles.

There is some hope that further fragments will be found. Lord Marlowe was a prolific diarist, as his writings both attest in themselves and attest to. But for the purposes of the readers of this translation, this abridged timeline should prove useful. It is oft remarked upon that the great lengths of time involved in star travel and the nature of cryonic fugue make tracking the biological age of any person difficult. As such, I have included my best guesses as to the biological age of Lord Marlowe at each phase of his life, basing my figures off those given by the man himself throughout the text. Where necessary, I have provided estimates based off of the available data and taking into account the man's queer habit of declining to sleep for large

portions of his numerous interstellar journeys. Scholars relying upon this table should thereby be made aware of its provisional nature.

Tor Paulos, Nov Belgaer: Colchis
ISD 17998.12.04

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 16117	0	DELOS	Hadrian Marlowe is born on Delos, decanted 09.29, the eldest child of the Archon Alistair Marlowe and his wife, the Lady Liliana Kephalos-Marlowe.
ISD 16136	19	DELOS	EMPIRE OF SILENCE: With the aid of his mother, Hadrian Marlowe flees his home on Delos with the help of Jaddian smugglers.
ISD 16168	19	EMESH	EMPIRE OF SILENCE: Hadrian Marlowe arrives on the planet Emesh.
ISD 16172	23	EMESH	EMPIRE OF SILENCE: Battle of Emesh. Hadrian Marlowe departs Emesh as part of the newly formed <i>Meidua Red Company</i> with a mandate to seek the lost planet of Vorgossos.
ISD 16176	23	ARDISTAMA	The Meidua Red Company arrives on Ardistama in the Norman Freeholds as part of their quest for the lost planet of Vorgossos.
<i>Note: Not all years between ISD 16176 and ISD 16179 are here accounted for.</i>			
ISD 16179	24	MONMARA	The Meidua Red Company arrives on Monmara in the Norman Freeholds as part of their quest for the lost planet of Vorgossos.
<i>Note: Not all years between ISD 16179 and ISD 16202 are here accounted for.</i>			
ISD 16202	29	PHAROS	The Meidua Red Company becomes embroiled in a brushfire war on the planet Pharos. Hadrian deposes the ex-Imperial warlord Marius Whent, Otavia Corvo and her Normans join the Red Company.
ISD 16207	31	NAGRAMMA	KNOWLEDGE: The Red Company visits the planet Nagramma. Hadrian and Jinan Azhar visit a Cid Arthurian <i>fordgron</i> .

Note: Not all years between ISD 16207 and ISD 16213 are here accounted for.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 16213	34	SANORA	On the planet Sanora, the Red Company receive a lead that will lead them to a weapons dealer called The Painted Man, who it is said hails from Vorgossos.
ISD 16219	35	RUSTAM	HOWLING DARK: The Red Company arrives on Rustam, where a meeting with The Painted Man puts them on the road to Vorgossos.
ISD 16226	35	MARCH STATION	HOWLING DARK: The Red Company travels to March Station, where they book passage to Vorgossos aboard the Extrasolarian Sojourner <i>Enigma of Hours</i> .
ISD 16227	35	VORGOSOS	HOWLING DARK: Arriving at Vorgossos, Hadrian meets Kharn Sagara and the Mericanii daimon, Brethren. Kharn introduces Hadrian to the Cielcin prince, Aranata Otiolo, who kills Hadrian in battle. Hadrian is restored to life by the intervention of the Quiet, earning the appellation <i>Halfmortal</i> and the title of Imperial knight.
ISD 16236	36	FORUM	Arriving at the Imperial capital on Forum, Hadrian is formally inducted into the Royal Knights Victorian. Reformation of the <i>Meidua Red Company</i> into the <i>Imperial Red Company</i> . Hadrian is given the great battleship, <i>Tamerlane</i> for his command.
ISD 16257	40	THAGURA	QUEEN AMID ASHES: In their first official mission, the Imperial Red Company defeat the Cielcin Prince Inumjazi Muzugara at Thagura. Hadrian discovers the war crimes of the Baroness Gadar Malyan, and puts her to death by the sword.

Note: Not all years between ISD 16257 and ISD 16263 are here accounted for.

ISD 16263	43	CELLAS	The battle of Cellas occurs.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16263 and ISD 16319 are here accounted for.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 16319	56	FORUM	The <i>Tamerlane</i> returns to the Imperial capital after its first tour of the war front.
ISD 16322	59	FORUM	The <i>Tamerlane</i> departs Forum for its second tour in the Norman theater.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16327	64	NAGAPUR	THE NIGHT CAPTAIN: En route to Nessus, the <i>Tamerlane</i> is attacked by pirates while most of its crew is asleep. The ship is saved through the combined efforts of Commander Halford and Hadrian Marlowe himself.
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ISD 16347	65	NESSUS	The <i>Tamerlane</i> stops at Nessus on its return to the front for her second tour.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16347 and ISD 16365 are here accounted for.

ISD 16365	67	OXIANA	The Battle of Oxiana occurs.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16365 and ISD 16409 are here accounted for.

ISD 16409	72	SAMARRA	The <i>Tamerlane</i> is badly damaged in the pyrrhic victory at Samarra, and has to be tendered back to Nessus for repairs.
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ISD 16425	72	NESSUS	The <i>Tamerlane</i> stops at Nessus for repairs following the disastrous consequences of the Battle of Samarra. Hadrian enters fugue for much of his stay.
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ISD 16432	74	NESSUS	The <i>Tamerlane</i> departs Nessus, newly repaired, with orders to hunt for two legions lost near the Arae system.
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ISD 16443	78	ARAE	THE DEMONS OF ARAE: By Imperial order, the Red Company tracks two missing legions to the remote planet of Arae, where they discover the first evidence of an alliance between the Cielcin Prince Syriani Dorayaica and an Extrasolarian faction called MINOS.
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YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16452	84	FORUM	The <i>Tamerlane</i> returns to Forum following the shocking revelations at Arae.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16452 and ISD 16462 are here accounted for.

ISD 16462	89	APTUCCA	Hadrian Marlowe defeats the Cielcin Prince Ulurani in single combat, banishing its clan from the system and saving the planet without losing more than a handful of troops.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16462 and ISD 16511 are here accounted for.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 16511	113	FORUM	DEMON IN WHITE: After an attack on the Imperial shipyards at Hermonassa by Syriani Dorayaica, Hadrian is sent on a mission to locate a legion caravan lost en route between Gododdin and Nemavand.
ISD 16523	115	GODODDIN	DEMON IN WHITE: Hadrian Marlowe visits Gododdin for the first time and recruits a number of Irchtani auxilia to his company.
ISD 16534	126	DION STATION	DEMON IN WHITE: The <i>Tamerlane</i> defeats Cielcin raiders under the command of Iubalu, one of Dorayaica's White Hand, and rescues what remains of the lost legion caravan.
ISD 16536	128	NEMAVAND	DEMON IN WHITE: After their victory over Iubalu, the <i>Tamerlane</i> delivers the rescued legions to Nemavand and returns to Forum.
ISD 16561	138	FORUM	DEMON IN WHITE: Hadrian's victory over Iubalu is celebrated with an Imperial triumph. Later, a failed assassination attempt drives Hadrian from Forum, and the Emperor grants him permission to visit the Great Library of Colchis.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 16587	143	COLCHIS	DEMON IN WHITE: The <i>Tamerlane</i> arrives on Colchis, where the Red Company enjoys some well-deserved shore leave while Hadrian and Valka Onderra investigate the nature of the Quiet. Hadrian is reunited with Tor Gibson.
ISD 16594	150	COLCHIS	DEMON IN WHITE: Hadrian discovers the Mericanii AI, Horizon, in the basement of the Great Library, and departs Colchis to seek the Quiet's homeworld.
ISD 16641	156	ANNICA	DEMON IN WHITE: The <i>Tamerlane</i> discovers and names the planet Annica. Excavations of the Quiet ruins there begin.
ISD 16648	163	ANNICA	DEMON IN WHITE: Hadrian Marlowe encounters the Quiet. The dig on Annica is ended abruptly by news of the Cielcin conquest of Marinus. The <i>Tamerlane</i> rushes to the relief of Berenike.
ISD 16699	172	BERENIKE	DEMON IN WHITE: The <i>Tamerlane</i> arrives to assist in the defense of Berenike.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16701	174	BERENIKE	DEMON IN WHITE: Humanity is victorious in the Battle of Berenike. Hadrian Marlowe demonstrates his abilities in combat against Syriani Dorayaica for all the galaxy to see. Valka Onderra is injured in a wizards' duel against the Extrasolarian sorcerer, Urbaine.
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ISD 16739	181	EDDA	The <i>Tamerlane</i> arrives on Edda in the Demarchy of Tavros, seeking aid from the Tavrosi for Valka's neurological damage.
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ISD 16741	183	EDDA	The Red Company is forced to flee Tavros, having effected a politically disastrous, but successful mission to rescue Valka Onderra from a Demarchist medical asylum.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16741 and ISD 16747 are here accounted for.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16747	186	METTINA	The Battle of Mettina occurs.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16747 and ISD 16759 are here accounted for.

ISD 16759	190	ORDINA	The Battle of Ordina occurs.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16759 and ISD 16773 are here accounted for.

ISD 16773	196	PERINTHUSWAR STORIES:	The Red Company brings the four-year siege of Perinthus by the Cielcin to an end.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16773 and ISD 16797 are here accounted for.

ISD 16797	206	COMUM	The Battle of Comum occurs.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16797 and ISD 16834 are here accounted for.

ISD 16834	229	SENUESSA	Humanity wins a narrow and crushingly pyrrhic victory against the forces of the Cielcin.
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Note: Not all years between ISD 16834 and ISD 16901 are here accounted for.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16901	253	SYBARIS	The Red Company wins a decisive victory against the Cielcin and their Extrasolarian allies, annexing the planet Sybaris to the Empire in the process. For his pains, Hadrian Marlowe is arrested by the Inquisition and taken to the planet Thermon for judgement.
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ISD 16913	253	THERMON	Hadrian arrives on Thermon for the start of his trial at the hands of the Chantry's Terran Inquisition. The records of this trial remain sealed.
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YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 16925	265	THERMON	The Emperor himself intervenes to free Hadrian from the Terran Inquisition when, after twelve years of failing to indict him, they attempt to kill him in his cell. He is seized by the Martian Guard and transferred to Nessus, under the care of Karol Venantian.
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ISD 16938	265	NESSUS	Hadrian and Valka begin their exile at Maddalo House on Nessus, capital of the Exarchate of Centaurus, effectively political prisoners. The <i>Tamerlane</i> is left in cold storage, maintained in high orbit above the planet, its crew in cryonic fugue.
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ISD 17006	333	EIKANA	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: An attack on the Imperial fuel refinery on Eikana prompts the Exarch of Nessus to order Hadrian out of exile. He saves the refinery from the Cielcin general Hushansa.
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ISD 17007	333	NESSUS	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: Returning from the Battle of Eikana, Hadrian meets with Emperor William at the start of his tour of the outer provinces. Hadrian is dispatched as apostol to the Lothrian Commonwealth.
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ISD 17050	340	PADMURAK	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: The <i>Tamerlane</i> arrives at Padmurak, capital of the Lothrian Commonwealth. They fail to secure an alliance, discovering that the Lothrians have aligned with the Cielcin. Hadrian is captured, and the <i>Tamerlane</i> is commandeered and brought to Dharan-Tun.
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ISD 17054	340	DHARAN-TUN	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: Hadrian arrives on Dharan-Tun, worldship-capital of Syriani Dorayaica, where he endures seven years of torment at the hands of the Cielcin prince.
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YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 17061	347	EUE	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: Hadrian accompanies Dorayaica to a meeting of the Cielcin princes, where he witnesses the Cielcin Prophet's consolidation of power, as it massacres its fellow princes and asserts its supremacy over the Cielcin race. The <i>Tamerlane</i> is destroyed, and Hadrian narrowly escapes with Valka Onderra.
ISD 17089	375	COLCHIS	KINGDOMS OF DEATH: Hadrian and Valka arrive on Colchis after a harrowing and lonely journey. There, they are reunited not only with the descendants of Siran Lordsworn, with whom they seek asylum, but with Tor Gibson.
ISD 17098	384	COLCHIS	ASHES OF MAN: The death of Tor Gibson prompts an end to Hadrian and Valka's secret exile. They surrender to Imperial authorities, and are conveyed back to Nessus by one Sir Hector Oliva.
ISD 17114	384	NESSUS	ASHES OF MAN: After a brief stay on Nessus and debrief with the Exarch, Hadrian and Valka are ordered to rendezvous with Emperor William on the planet Carteia.
ISD 17125	386	CARTEIA	ASHES OF MAN: Hadrian meets with the Emperor, where he is told about the Imperial effort to combat the Watchers, the Cielcin gods—a race of god-like, hyper-advanced alien life forms. He is assigned, along with Bassander Lin, with the destruction of an Extrasolarian fortress on Ganelon.
ISD 17131	386	GANELON	ASHES OF MAN: In the Battle of Ganelon, Hadrian assists the Imperial Legions in the destruction of an Extrasolarian depot, where they discover the development of the <i>lethovirus</i> . He is reunited with his friend, Olorin, and the Jaddian fleet.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 17134	386	FIDCHELL	ASHES OF MAN: En route to rendezvous with the Emperor after the battle, Hadrian encounters Prince Alexander, fleeing the siege on Perfugium. Hadrian and the fleet agree to rush to the rescue of the Emperor.
ISD 17136	386	PERFUGIUM	ASHES OF MAN: A strategic retreat at Perfugium sees the rescue of the Emperor by Hadrian, Bassander Lin, and the Jaddian forces. Valka Onderra is killed. Hadrian assaults the Emperor in a fit of rage and is

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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			saved a prison sentence by Lorian Aristedes. Hadrian escapes to Jadd with the help of Olorin.
ISD 17165	386	JADD	Hadrian Marlowe arrives on Jadd with the Dragonslayers. They are taken to the Jaddian military base at Islis Ulta, where Marlowe would live for many years.
ISD 17354	575	JADD	THE ROYAL GAME: For his cooperation, the Jaddian government grants Hadrian a daughter, Cassandra, grown from his and Valka's cells. A Jaddian intelligence officer attempts to have the child aborted.
ISD 17355	576	JADD	Birth of Cassandra Marlowe.
ISD 17362	583	JADD	THE FANGS OF OANNOS: Hadrian Marlowe slays Izemrasen of the House of Barasegh, Prince of Oannos, for attempting to assassinate Aldia, High Prince of Jadd.
ISD 17370	591	JADD	DAUGHTER OF SWORDS: A young Cassandra Marlowe is assaulted by her fellow students at the Fire School.
ISD 17395	616	JADD	DISQUIET GODS: Hadrian Marlowe's exile on Jadd ends with an Imperial pardon, brought to him by one Edouard Albé, who recruits Hadrian for Operation Gnomon: the Imperial mission to intercept and kill a Watcher before the Cielcin can recover it for the war effort.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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ISD 17408	616	SABRATHA	DISQUIET GODS: Operation Gnomon arrives on Sabratha, begins excavation of the Vaiartu ruins at Phanamhara.
ISD 17410	618	SABRATHA	DISQUIET GODS: The Battle of Sabratha occurs. Cielcin forces under the command of General Muzugara assault the planet in an attempt to capture the Watcher, Ushara.
ISD 17430	618	TIRYNS	DISQUIET GODS: The <i>ISV Gadelica</i> stops at Tiryms en route to Forum following the events at Sabratha.
ISD 17434	618	FORUM	DISQUIET GODS: The survivors of Operation Gnomon arrive on Forum. Hadrian is taken into protective custody by Crown Prince Aurelian.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
ISD 17438	622	FORUM	DISQUIET GODS: The Great Council of the Alliance convenes to discuss the Cielcin threat. Lorian Aristedes arrives as an emissary of the Latarran Monarchy. Hadrian Marlowe is allegedly assassinated.
ISD 17446	623	LATARRA	DISQUIET GODS: Hadrian Marlowe leads an embassy to the Monarch Calen Harendotes, arriving on Latarra.
ISD 17448	625	LATARRA	DISQUIET GODS: An alliance between Latarra and the Empire is fully formalized, and the two nations agree to launch a joint assault on Vorgossos in exchange for Latarran support against the Cielcin.
ISD 17457	626	MEROPE	DISQUIET GODS: The Latarran Grand Army rendezvouses with the joint Legion-Chantry fleet under Ohannes Douro and Sentinel-Commander Kedron in advance of the assault on Vorgossos.
ISD 17458	626	VORGOSSOS	DISQUIET GODS: The joint Imperial-Latarran armada is successful at conquering the Kingdom of Vorgossos. Kharn Sagara is deposed, and the starship <i>Demiurge</i> falls into the hands of Hadrian Marlowe.

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
<i>Note: Not all years between ISD 17458 and ISD 17485 are here accounted for.</i>			
ISD 17485	652	ANNICA	The <i>Demiurge</i> arrives at the planet Annica, where it remains in hiding for many years.
ISD 17499	666	ANNICA	SHADOWS UPON TIME: Prince Kaim du Otranto of Jadd arrives near Annica system, answering Hadrian Marlowe's summons.
ISD 17508	675	FORUM	SHADOWS UPON TIME: Hadrian Marlowe appears briefly at the Eternal City to consult with the Emperor.
ISD 17512	676	TENBA	SHADOWS UPON TIME: The <i>Demiurge</i> appears at Tenba en route to Gododdin.
ISD 17513	677	GODODDIN	SHADOWS UPON TIME: Hadrian arrives at Gododdin and prepares to mount an offensive against Syriani Dorayaica.
ISD 17516	680	BRACARA	SHADOWS UPON TIME: The <i>Demiurge</i> lingers at Bracara,

YEAR	AGE	LOCATION	EVENT
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awaiting the Cielcin attack.

ISD 17516	680	DANU	SHADOWS UPON TIME: The <i>Demiurge</i> engages the Cielcin at Danu and is forced to retreat to Gododdin.
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ISD 17519- 17521	683- 686	GODODDIN	SHADOWS UPON TIME: The Great Alliance is victorious against the Cielcin at the Battle of Gododdin, thanks to Hadrian Marlowe's usage of the <i>Astrophage</i> .
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ISD 17522	687	TENBA	SHADOWS UPON TIME: Hadrian Marlowe is captured after the Battle of Gododdin and hanged.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Seven years. It's been more than seven years since *Empire of Silence* was released in July of AD 2018, and very nearly a decade since I received that first phone call from Sarah Guan at DAW Books with an offer for what was then a four-book series.

When I sold *The Sun Eater* to DAW, I was about a month out of university. I was still waiting tables at Casa Carbone on Glenwood Avenue, and I was just wrapping up a year-long internship at Baen Books—an internship that fast became a job as Junior Editor. At the time, I still lived in an apartment with two roommates from school.

I had not yet met my wife.

A great many things have changed. I met Jenna. Married her. We have a house. Two daughters. And I have written a great deal: seven novels, three novellas, and a great many short stories.

The Sun Eater was my life's work. My dream. A dream I started working toward when I was eight-years-old and so smitten by Tolkien's Middle-Earth that I knew I must be a writer.

And it's over now. Finished.

I am writing this just a couple days after I finished the manuscript. Before the copyedit. Before the page proofs. Before it's all really over. In truth, I'm writing this because I don't know what to do with myself. I have the next series now ahead of me—a wilderness all unmapped. A new project. A new adventure. I'm ready to start. I am also exhausted. I don't know how I got this far, but I know I didn't get here alone, and so it feels appropriate to conclude this endeavor with a little gratitude:

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And finally, to each and every one of you, my readers. I've said it before, but none of this would have been possible without you. Your support and enthusiasm made this series happen, and it is the least I can do to repay your generosity with hard work. *The Sun Eater* has been a labor of love, not just for Hadrian and his compatriots, but for every one of you who has struggled with him over the last long decade. Rest assured, though Hadrian sails off now into something rather more than the sunset, the world he has fought for over the last several thousand pages is not ended. The world of *The Sun Eater* will return. I don't know when, I don't know how. But this is not the last we've seen of this far future.

But for the moment, some new adventure begins. I hear a knock at the door, and the hero on the other side has his own tale to tell: one of cursed bloodlines, of false queens and false gods and of a city rising in the savage west.

Here I must leave poor Hadrian, his victory achieved.

But though I go on without him, I do not go on alone.

See you in the next world, Reader.

Thank you for reading, and God bless.

—Christopher Ruocchio, June, AD 2025

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